

IN THE STEPS OF CHARLES DICKENS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Epping Forest: Its Literary and Historical Associations

The English Country Parson

Essex Heyday

Suffolk

Worthy Dr. Fuller

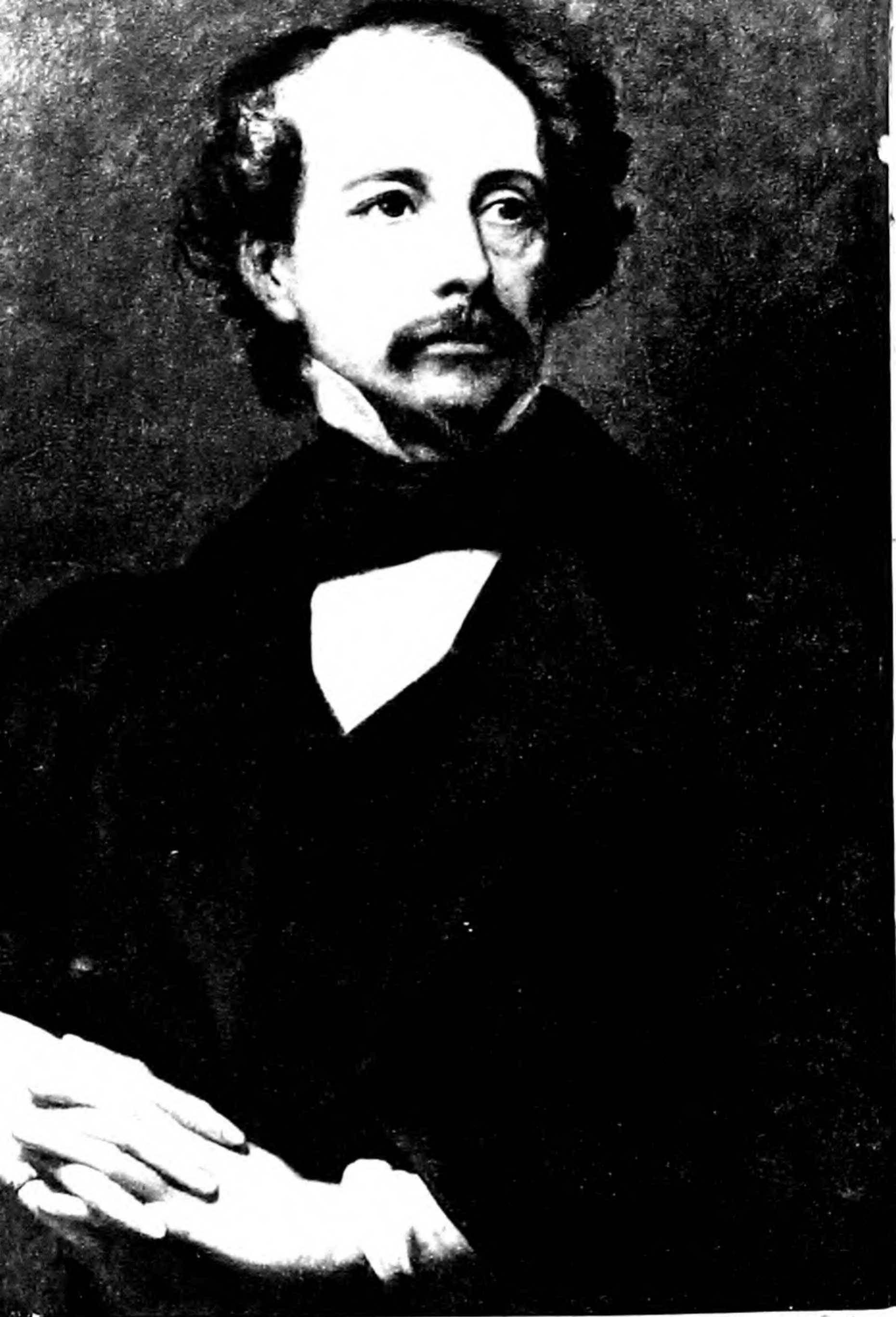
English Spas

Audley End

English Fairs and Markets

Thames Estuary





National Portrait Gallery

CHARLES DICKENS (by A. SCHEFFER, 1885)

IN THE STEPS OF
CHARLES DICKENS

by
WILLIAM ADDISON

With 15 Illustrations



RICH AND COWAN

RICH & COWAN

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PREFACE

WORDSWORTH'S servant said that her master's study was out of doors. The same may be said of Dickens. The outward scene—in particular the streets and alleys of London—were his lifelong study and stimulus. His sources were not records, but the persons and places he knew. Like the painter's, his visual sense was exceptionally strong and controlled both thought and feeling; but unlike the painter he required movement as well as sight. George Sala tells us how he was to be encountered 'in the oddest places and in the most inclement weather: In Ratcliffe Highway, on Haverstock Hill, on Camberwell Green, in Gray's Inn Lane, in the Wandsworth Road, at Hammersmith Broadway, in Norton Folgate, and at Kensall New Town. A hansom whirled you to the Bell and Horns at Brompton, and there was Charles Dickens striding as with seven-leagued boots, seemingly in the direction of North End, Fulham. The Metropolitan Railways disgorged you at Lisson Grove, and you met Charles Dickens plodding sturdily towards the Yorkshire Stingo. He was to be met rapidly skirting the grim brick wall of the prison in Coldbath Fields, or trudging along the Seven Sisters' Road at Holloway, or bearing under a steady press of sail through Highgate Archway, or pursuing the even tenor of his way up the Vauxhall Bridge Road.' And wherever he went he was registering impressions for the particular book or article he was writing.

'What is the indestructible residue in Dickens's art . . . ? What, in fact, has Dickens to offer a modern reader?' asks Mr. Julian Symons in a book on Dickens published in 1951. Answering his own questions he says: 'He offers, first, an unparalleled visual sense, a capacity which never fails in setting down memorably the features of a human being, a house or a landscape.' He then goes on to say 'this vision was not a literal one; it comes from the fantasy world of

childhood in which lies the seed of all Dickens's works'. A study of the childhood of genius is always fundamental to a sound understanding of what follows, and with Dickens it is the clue to almost everything. But the fantasy world he created as a child was peopled by real persons, with real jobs, who inhabited houses that could be turned up in a local directory. Even then he did not escape from reality into a world created by fancy, but simply intensified the actual in a vain attempt to make it more secure and friendly. The extreme sensitivity of the frightened child in Dickens was with him to the end, quivering with the same insecurity and the same dread. Not for one moment was he ever confident in either his fame or his family. In the end he lost the latter—partly, no doubt, as the result of this fear. As for his fame, it may seem absurd to us that he should have doubted the permanence of that, but he did. It is a remarkable fact that Dickens, now so often accused of insufferable conceit, not once claimed that his work would live, or that he himself would be among his country's immortals. And this notwithstanding financial success and public acclamation such as no other writer had ever dreamed of. It is this haunting fear in Dickens—the terror that found its final, nightmare expression in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*—which made many of his descriptions so horrific that they become pathological in their implications.

But while the darkness in Dickens produced nightmares and human grotesques, it alternated with daylight that was the brighter for the clouds it banished, enjoyed by simple genial people living in a world that seemed made for their pleasure. We have heard so much lately about the shadows in Dickens—the Dostoevsky side of his genius—that we may tend to forget how sane and wholesome most of his work was. For years now he has been hustled, as it were, from the psychiatrist's consulting-room to the magistrates' court, where he has been charged with every conceivable offence against his wife and children, and several against society in general. He has received his sentences and paid his fines, and now that he is a free man again, I

have tried in this book to get him out into the air, so to speak, and restore him to the people and places he loved—to Mr. Pickwick, Sam Weller, and the rest of them, in the England that was so vital to the renewal of his mind as well as his body while he was alive, and is still the essential environment of all his best work.

Highbrows, I know, are inclined to disparage this topographical approach to Dickens. These discussions as to whether this or that place was the one intended, they say, are mere antiquarian pastimes that have no bearing on Dickens as a great novelist and prolific creator of characters—three hundred and sixty of them in *Pickwick Papers* alone. They may be right; but I doubt whether Dickens would have thought so. . . . He never did think the highbrows right. In any case, there is far more in Dickens than highbrows are likely to discover. Bookish people are notoriously unobservant when their eyes are off the printed page. Dickens was not bookish; he was observant. He was so exceptionally observant—so instantaneous and accurate in his mental recording—that some of us would argue that it is impossible to appreciate his work adequately without taking this into account. Moreover, besides being other things Dickens was one of the most perceptive—perhaps *the* most perceptive—of the many English humanists and travellers who have described the country as it was in their own generation. It is a title he holds in addition to that of novelist, and on some aspects of late Georgian and early Victorian life and landscape he is unsurpassed as a delineator. As one who shares his love of England, and who has, perhaps, a more intimate knowledge than most of the places he delighted in, I have tried to throw a little more light on this particular side of his work, without, I trust, losing sight of the more important aspects.

The roads I have travelled with him, and the places we have visited—as it seems—together, are all in England. Dickens spent a good deal of time both in America and on the Continent; but the effect of these excursions on his work was strangely negative. He was never at ease outside his

own country. England was as much as he could cope with. And can we wonder at this when we remember how much his own country meant to him: in particular its inns, where the kind of people he liked best forgathered and became most waggish. There are twenty-two of them in *Pickwick*, and over a hundred elsewhere in his works. Even so, in going in search of one or other of the more obscure I have often felt like Kit Nubbles, who in like circumstances 'soon became uncertain of the spot, and could only say it was thereabouts, he thought, and that these alterations were confusing'. Readers may feel that it would have saved some of us a great deal of trouble if Dickens had written a book on the topography of his works himself. It would certainly have saved the waste of thousands of reams of paper in books, and hundreds of correspondence columns in journals, learned and otherwise. On the other hand we may doubt whether Dickens knew half as much about his own topography as Dexter, Kitton, or Colonel Gadd. For my own part, I have tried to observe the rules of evidence, and when in doubt have put up Dickens to speak for himself. Nevertheless, the identity of some of his haunts is still in doubt, and critics have even asserted that Dickens himself was wrong about several identifications. I doubt whether I am entirely innocent of the offence myself! But usually I have preferred to side with Dickens, however strong the case against him might be. He may not always be right; but he is usually the only person who is entitled to be wrong about his own topography.

W. A.

LOUGHTON.

January 1955

7th Feb. 1812 - Portsmouth

CHRONOLOGY

- 1812 Charles Dickens born at 1 Mile End Terrace, Landport, Portsmouth, 7 February.
The family moved to Hawke Street, Portsmouth.
- 1816 Left Portsmouth on the recall of John Dickens to London. Lodged in Fitzroy Square.
- 1817 John Dickens transferred to Chatham. Rented 2 Ordnance Terrace.
- 1819 Moved to a smaller house, 18 St. Mary's Place, Chatham.
Charles Dickens went to school kept by William Giles.
- 1822 The Dickens family returned to London, and rented 16 Bayham Street, Camden Town.
- 1823 The Bayham Street house given up, and the family moved to 4 Gower Street North, where Mrs. Dickens tried to establish a school for young ladies.
- 1824 John Dickens arrested for debt and imprisoned, 30 February.
Mrs. Dickens joined her husband in prison.
Charles put to work at Warren's Blacking Factory, Hungerford Market. Lodgings taken for him in Little College Street, from which he moved to a back attic in Lant Street, Borough, in order to be nearer his parents.
John Dickens released on inheriting a legacy which enabled him to discharge his debts, 28 May.
The family took a house in Johnson Street, Somers Town, and Charles was allowed to resume his education by attending Wellington House Academy, Hampstead Road, June.
- 1825 John Dickens's older brother, William, died, bequeathing £1000 to be divided at his widow's death between his brother's children.

- 1827 Charles Dickens left school and found employment with Charles Molloy, solicitor, Symond's Inn, March.
Left Molloy and engaged himself to Ellis and Blackmore, solicitors, 1 Raymond Buildings, Gray's Inn, May.
Family again in financial difficulties and moved to lodgings in the Polygon, Camden Town.
- 1828 Left Ellis and Blackmore and learnt shorthand with a view to becoming a reporter.
- 1829 Installed in appointment with the proctors in Doctors' Commons.
- 1830 Set up as a shorthand-writer in a one-room office at 5 Bell Yard, Carter Lane.
Acquired a reader's ticket at the British Museum, February 8.
Met Maria Beadnell, with whom he fell in love, May.
- 1831 Lived with parents at 10 Norfolk Street.
- 1832 Tried to get an engagement on the stage, address now 70 Margaret Street, Cavendish Street, February.
Obtained post on the staff of *The True Sun*. Entered the Reporters' Gallery of the House of Commons, March.
Address, 13 Fitzroy Street, July.
Working exclusively for *The Mirror of Parliament*, August.
- 1833 Family moved to 18 Bentinck Street, January.
Party at Bentinck Street to celebrate Charles coming of age, February.
- 1834 Edinburgh, September.
- 1835 Became engaged to Catherine, daughter of George Hogarth, editor of *The Evening Chronicle*, May.
Placed his first book, *Sketches by Boz*, with Macrone for publication.
Moved to chambers in Furnival's Inn, December.

- 1836 *Sketches by Boz* published in 2 vols. by John Macrone, 7 February.
First number of *The Pickwick Papers* published 31 March; concluded November 1837.
Married Catherine Hogarth at St. Luke's Church, Chelsea, 2 April. Honeymoon at Chalk.
- 1837 First number of *Oliver Twist* published in *Bentley's Miscellany*, February; concluded March 1839.
Moved to 48 Doughty Street, March.
Death of Mary Hogarth, 7 May.
Visited Belgium with Mrs. Dickens and Hablot K. Browne (Phiz), July.
At Broadstairs with wife and child, staying at 12 High Street, August and September.
At the Old Ship Hotel, Brighton, for one week, November.
- 1838 Set out for Yorkshire with 'Phiz' to inspect the Yorkshire schools exposed in *Nicholas Nickleby*, 30 January, returned to London, 6 February.
First number of *Nicholas Nickleby* published; concluded October 1839.
Rented house at Twickenham for the summer for wife and family, June.
At Broadstairs, August and September.
Started on journey to Midlands, North Wales, and Manchester with 'Phiz', returned to London, 8 November.
- 1839 Visited Exeter and found a home for his parents, March.
First number of *Master Humphrey's Clock* published, April; concluded 27 November, 1841.
At Elm Cottage, Petersham, with his family, June-July.
At 40 Albion Street, Broadstairs, September.
Moved from Doughty Street to 1 Devonshire Terrace, December.
- 1840 At Broadstairs with family, June to September.

- 1841 First number of *Barnaby Rudge* in *Master Humphrey's Clock*, 13 February; concluded 27 November.
 Visited Scotland with his wife, June-July.
 At Broadstairs, August and September.
 Completed *Barnaby Rudge* while staying at Windsor, November.
- 1842 Sailed from Liverpool in S.S. *Britannia* for Boston, Mass., 4 January.
 Entertained at dinners in Boston, Hartford, and New York.
 Returned to England, 7 June.
 At Broadstairs, August and September.
American Notes published, 18 October.
 Visited Cornwall with Forster, Maclise, and Stanfield, November.
- 1843 First number of *Martin Chuzzlewit* published, January; concluded July 1844.
 Visited the Smithsons at Malton, Yorkshire, June.
 At Broadstairs, September.
 Presided at meeting of Manchester Athenaeum, 5 October.
A Christmas Carol published.
- 1844 Presided at meeting of Liverpool Mechanics' Institute, 26 February.
 Presided at meeting of Birmingham Polytechnic, 28 February.
 In Italy with wife and family, 1 July, 1844, to June 1845.
- 1845 At Broadstairs, August and September.
The Cricket on the Hearth published, December.
- 1846 At Lausanne, May to November.
 First number of *Dombey and Son* published, October; concluded April 1848.
 Living in Paris with family, November to February 1847.
- 1847 In temporary residence at Chester Place, Regent's Park, March to June.

- 1847 Visited Brighton, May.
At Broadstairs, July to October.
Presided at meeting of Leeds Mechanics' Institute,
1 December.
Presided at opening of Glasgow Athenaeum, 28
December.
- 1848 At Brighton with his wife, March.
Visited the West of England with Leech and Forster.
At Broadstairs, August and September.
At Brighton, November.
The Haunted Man published, December.
- 1849 At Brighton, February.
First number of ~~*David Copperfield*~~ published, May;
concluded November 1850.
At Brighton and Broadstairs, June.
Took house at Bonchurch, Isle of Wight, for the
summer for wife and family.
Left Bonchurch for Broadstairs, October.
Visited the Watsons at Rockingham Castle, November.
- 1850 At Brighton, March.
First number of *Household Words* published, 30
March; concluded 28 May, 1859.
In Paris with Maclise, July.
At Broadstairs, September and October.
- 1851 In Paris, February.
At Malvern, Mrs. Dickens ill, March.
Death of John Dickens, 31 March.
At Fort House, Broadstairs, May to November.
Moved to Tavistock House, November.
- 1852 First number of *Bleak House* published, March; con-
cluded September 1853.
- 1853 In Birmingham for presentation, January.
At Boulogne with wife and family, June to September.
In Switzerland with wife and family, October to
December.
- 1854 First number of *Hard Times* published in *Household
Words*, 1 April; concluded 12 August.

- 1855 At Folkestone with family, July to October.
In Paris with family, October to May, 1856.
Gave readings at Peterborough and Sheffield,
December.
First number of *Little Dorrit* published; concluded
June 1857.
- 1856 Bought Gad's Hill Place, 14 March.
- 1857 In the Lake District with Wilkie Collins; wrote *A
Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices* for *Household
Words*, September.
Readings at Coventry and Chatham, December.
- 1858 Reading at Bristol, January.
Reading at Edinburgh, 26 March.
Set out on first provincial reading tour at Clifton.
(August to November.)
Entertained to dinner at Coventry, December.
- 1859 Commenced London readings at St. Martin's Hall,
3 January.
First number of *A Tale of Two Cities* published;
concluded 26 November.
At Broadstairs, September.
- 1860 First number of *The Uncommercial Traveller* pub-
lished; concluded 13 August.
Final move from Tavistock House to Gad's Hill,
October.
First number of *Great Expectations* published, 1
December; concluded 3 August, 1861.
- 1861 Rented 3 Hanover Terrace, Regent's Park, February
to May.
At Dover, May.
Second series of provincial readings started at
Norwich, 28 October. Continued until end of
January 1862.
- 1862 Occupied 16 Hyde Park Gate, February to June.
In Paris, October and November.
- 1863 In Paris, January to early February.

- 1864 Rented 57 Gloucester Place, Hyde Park, February to June.
First number of *Our Mutual Friend* published May; concluded November 1865.
- 1865 Rented 16 Somers Place, Hyde Park, March to June.
In France, May.
Spoke at Knebworth on behalf of the Guild of Literature and Art, 29 July.
In Paris, September.
- 1866 Rented 6 Southwick Place, Hyde Park, February to June.
Started third provincial readings at Cheltenham, 23 March, continued until end of May.
- 1867 Sailed from Liverpool for America, 2 November.
Reading Tour in America until April 1868.
- 1868 Commenced series of readings in London and other towns, continued until May 1869.
- 1869 Entertained to dinner at Liverpool, 10 April.
Broke down at Preston; reading tour cancelled, 22 April.
- 1870 Rented 5 Hyde Park Place, January to June.
Commenced series of farewell readings in London, delivered January, February, March. Final reading, March 15.
First number of *Edwin Drood* published, April; concluded September.
Death at Gad's Hill, 9 June.

CHAPTER I

THE ENGLAND OF DICKENS

THE past, we are sometimes told, is the one thing we can be sure of. The future is veiled; the present too close to be seen in true perspective. It is a comforting thought; but one that no serious student of the past, knowing, as he must, how history is made and remade in each succeeding generation, could hold. Victorian England has seemed to our own frustrated and bewildered generation a stately, confident age of leisure and prosperity. So it was, no doubt, in comparison with our own age. But such things are relative, and if we compare the England of Victoria with the England of George III we see that the security we imagined—and that many of the Victorians themselves imagined—was largely illusory. The terrific impact of industrialism was already shattering the social economy of the Whigs and Tories. Even though the landed gentry, who still controlled the country, were enjoying affluence beyond the dreams of their grandfathers, the writing was already on the wall for all except the fortunate few who had mineral wealth below the surface of their green and pleasant acres, or owned land in the heart of London. A substantial measure of genuine security was restored to the nation towards the end of Victoria's reign; but when Dickens began to write England was in a state of alarm which in parts of the country came near to panic. The machine-breaking of the Luddites belonged, in fact, to the year of his birth. Nor was the alarm confined to economics and industry. To Carlyle, even the confident Liberal England of Gladstone was a place where men had lost pride in individual endeavour; and while seemingly interminable novels, histories, and epics were being published in magnificent multi-volumed editions, Bagehot—the year is 1855—could complain that people

took their literature 'in morsels, as they take sandwiches on a journey'.

The prevailing insecurity was undoubtedly personal to Dickens himself—of this we shall have more to consider presently, because it is the clue to much in his character that has puzzled his biographers—and it may well have been this personal insecurity that made him so sensitive to the social alarms and excursions of the world into which he was born, and in which he grew up. Dame Una Pope-Hennessy describes him as 'an adept in what he called laying his hand upon the time', which made him, she says, 'the recognized exponent of the English character to Victorian England'. It is to be noted, however, that she says to, and not in, or of, Victorian England. When we run through the novels with this in mind we are surprised to find how late the background that most of us would identify as Victorian is introduced. Dickens is himself so eminent a Victorian that before we look closer we tend to identify his work too literally with the circumstances of his lifetime. In fact, only in *Great Expectations*, *Our Mutual Friend*, and *Edwin Drood*, does he catch up with the England of his maturity, and in only one book, *Hard Times*, does he describe the introduction of machinery into industry, which many would say was the most important development of his time. *Pickwick*, for instance, is suffused with the afterglow of Georgian England. And this, we shall find, was the England Dickens loved and dreamed of, because there is no denying that he was a sentimentalist, with a lingering fondness for the world he glimpsed for a few years in childhood, and that was all too soon blotted out for ever from his actual life—only to be regained by writing, or when, as at Gad's Hill and on holiday, he could dominate his environment with the high spirits that were always ready to break through when the world was not too insistent and oppressive.

This dream world of Dickens was not the creation of fancy. It was real and circumstantial. It was not a place of palaces and fairy princes, or of Utopian plenty. Its streets were the streets of London—narrow and dirty. Its shops

were kept by old men in night-caps, who were summoned from their back-parlours or benches by a tinkling bell attached to a spring on the shop door. There was sand on the flag floor of the shop and the counter was protected by a strip of oilcloth. As likely as not business would be interrupted to watch a passing funeral, for there was always somebody dying in those crowded streets and alleys of Dickensian England, and funeral processions were spectacular events. The horses that drew the cortège would be glossy black steeds, their harness garlanded with pompoms and their foreheads given a strange appearance by the addition of a black plume in the position of a unicorn's horn. Dickens revelled in funerals. When Anthony Chuzzlewit was laid to rest, Mr. Mold, the undertaker, told Pecksniff gleefully about the preparations. 'I have orders, Sir,' he said, 'to put on my whole establishment of mutes; and mutes come very dear, Mr. Pecksniff, not to mention their drink. To provide silver plated handles of the very best description, ornamented with angels' heads from the most expensive dies. To be perfectly profuse in feathers. In short, Sir, to turn out something absolutely gorgeous.'

Much of the shadow show of this strange yet real world depended on its half-lights. There were no brilliantly lit streets and houses in those days. Most of London was without even gas in Dickens's boyhood, although Pall Mall had gas lamps in 1807. Instead, there were the twinkling oil-lamps that some of us remember in the stables and harness-rooms of our own youth. Every night the watchman went his rounds.

Dickens loved these half-lights, with their distorting shadows. Especially he loved candlelight. It is true that eventually it gives place to gaslight in his work. There was gas, we may recall, in the parlour of the Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters, and it illumined Mr. Boffin's Bower; yet in *Our Mutual Friend*, 1864-5, Mrs. Wilfer sets down her candle in her Holloway house, across the 'tract of suburban sahara where . . . bones were boiled . . . and dust was heaped by contractors'. Holloway was still semi-rural in 1865. And,

after all, most of us who have either reached or passed middle-age can remember the time when guests in all country houses took their candles upstairs with them when they retired for the night. The coming of gas was a far greater marvel than the coming of electricity—or so it seemed. I remember the story of an old weaver I knew in my own youth in the North of England, who, when taken into a gaslit room for the first time, exclaimed in wonder: 'Eh mon, dayleet's a fool to yon.' How Dickens would have loved that story—and used it! And do you remember how, when Mr. Pickwick took out the *Legend of King Bladud* to read before going to bed, 'he lighted his bedroom candle, that it might burn up well by the time he finished'? Actually, Dickens himself forgot that the candle had been lit and allowed the operation to be repeated at the end of the story; but that is beside the point.

This attachment to the happy world of his childhood, and his defective grasp of other periods, had the same cause, namely, that his brain was brilliant but ill-nurtured—that is to say, he was keener in his reactions to the world of his own generation because he knew so little about others. It is possible that he was by nature, as one of his school friends put it, sharp rather than thoughtful; but even so, his receptive period was both heightened and cut short by the instability of his domestic background in youth, as a result of which he was to remain emotionally immature to the end of his life. The instability of his own home at Gad's Hill more than forty years later is, in fact, traceable to the instability of his father's home in Camden Town. The same disturbance, which we shall discuss in detail presently, interfered with his education, but not with his natural precocity in general as well as personal matters. It is remarkable, for example, that he should have understood so well the significance of such portents as the Gordon Riots of 1780, described in *Barnaby Rudge*, or have grasped so early the nervousness inherent in the self-justification of the landed gentry, which he expresses through Sir Leicester Dedlock, who says: 'Upon my reputation and principles, the flood-

gates of society are burst open, and the waters have obliterated the landmarks of the framework of the cohesion by which things are held together.'

But his insight into the changes of his time was curiously restricted. To the significance of mechanical advancement as such he was almost blind. The one great mechanical change in which he was interested was that from road to rail, and we may recall his vivid account of the impact of railways on London. 'The first shock of a great earthquake,' he relates, 'had just at that period, rent the whole neighbourhood to its centre. Traces of its course were visible on every side. Houses were knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pits and trenches dug in the ground; enormous heaps of earth and clay thrown up; buildings that were undermined and shaking, propped by great beams of wood. Here, a chaos of carts, overthrown and jumbled together, lay topsy-turvy at the bottom of a steep unnatural hill; there, confused treasures of iron soaked and rusted in something that had accidentally become a pond. Everywhere were bridges that led nowhere; thoroughfares that were wholly impassable; Babel towers of chimneys, wanting half their height; temporary wooden houses and enclosures, in the most unlikely situations; carcasses of ragged tenements, and fragments of unfinished walls and arches, and piles of scaffolding, and wildernesses of bricks, and giant forms of cranes, and tripods straddling above nothing. There were a hundred thousand shapes and substances of incompleteness, wildly mingled out of their places, upside down, burrowing in the earth, aspiring in the air, mouldering in the water, and unintelligible as any dream. Hot springs and fiery eruptions, the usual attendants upon earthquakes, lent their contributions of confusion to the scene. Boiling water hissed and heaved within dilapidated walls; whence, also, the glare and roar of flames came issuing forth; and mounds of ashes blocked up rights-of-way, and wholly changed the law and custom of the neighbourhood.' Such was the scene in North London, the part most familiar to Dickens, in the eighteenth-thirties and forties.

The change from coach to rail travel was practically contemporaneous with his own life. The first steam engines were being made in the workshops when he was a child of six or seven; the first locomotive was put on the rails in the year in which he set up as a shorthand writer in a one-room office in Bell Yard, Carter Lane, and got his British Museum reader's ticket, that is to say, in 1830.

The explanation of this particular interest is simple. Transport, whatever its shape or purpose, fascinated Dickens. He loved getting about. His favourite pastimes were riding and walking. The interest in railways just mentioned was not in engines but in locomotion. He was equally fascinated in all its means, from the carts that rattled into Covent Garden with vegetables at dawn to the cabriolets and one-horse hackney cabs that carried home young rakes and elderly roués at midnight. And what variety there was! There were hooded gigs, or cabs, with the driver on a tiny seat raised above that of his fares; the hansom, more elegantly proportioned, with the seat behind, which came into vogue about the middle of the century. In fact, while road transport was being superseded for long distance travel, it was increasing in London itself. Roads were being improved, and consequently the river, traditionally the city's principal highway, was going out of use for local traffic. Bridges were being built and the number of watermen plying from the old riverside stairs was shrinking rapidly. Many of them became scavengers of the kind described in *Our Mutual Friend*, others attended at cab-ranks to water the horses.

But this, of course, applied to London only. Over the country as a whole the great change in transport was from coach to train, and in Dickens we have the coaching age in its last and ripest manifestation, with Tony Weller on the box and the best of good company—with a few oddities thrown in—among the passengers. What a tingling, spanking world it was! 'Another crack of the whip, and on they speed, at a smart gallop, the horses tossing their heads and rattling the harness, as if in exhilaration at the rapidity of

the motion.' It was not always as lively as that, of course. There was the *Nicholas Nickleby* journey to Dotheboys Hall at Bowes in Yorkshire, when, 'The weather was intensely and bitterly cold; a great deal of snow fell from time to time, and the wind was intolerably keen. . . . The night and the snow came on together, and dismal enough they were. There was no sound to be heard but the howling of the wind, for the noise of the wheels and the tread of the horses' feet were rendered inaudible by the thick coating of snow which covered the ground, and was fast increasing every moment.' After two of the outside passengers had got down at Grantham, 'the remainder wrapped themselves more closely in their coats and cloaks, and leaving the light and warmth of the town behind them, pillowed themselves against the luggage, and prepared with many half suppressed moans, again to encounter the piercing blast which swept across the open country'. Moreover, as Mr. Pickwick said, 'Travelling was in a troubled state, and the minds of coachmen were unsettled. . . . Stage coaches were upsetting in all directions, horses were bolting, boats were overturning, and boilers were bursting.' Travel, whether by land or sea, was a hazardous venture. And how fortunate for Dickens that it was!

Dickens took his first recorded railway journey in November 1838—the year, that is to say, of the coach journey to Yorkshire just mentioned. He was then twenty-six. Writing to Mrs. Dickens from the Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool, he says: 'We shall leave here at 3 o'clock on Thursday morning, and shall be at the Euston Square Station of the Birmingham Railway—I should think about 2 on Thursday afternoon.' Eleven hours for a journey that can now be done comfortably between breakfast and luncheon seems an irritating sort of prospect, but it compared very favourably with the fourteen to fifteen miles per hour of the fastest coaches, and was about twice as fast as the average.

Trains must have been a great convenience to so busy a man as Dickens, although his natural sympathies were certainly not with Mr. Gregsbury, M.P., of *Nicholas Nickleby*,

who rejoiced in the progress shown by the railway, but with Mrs. Gamp, who thought 'them screeching railroad ones' responsible for innumerable premature births. 'A guard upon a railway,' she stated, 'only three years opened,' had acted as godfather 'to six and twenty blessed little strangers, equally unexpected, and all on 'um named after the Ingeins as was the cause.' Yet sympathetic or not, Dickens was just as capable of registering vivid impressions of journeys by train as he was of those by coach. The best is in *Our Mutual Friend*, where the Chairman of a company is 'in such request at so many Boards, so far apart, that he never travels less by railway than three thousand miles a week'. The speed and distance within the range of this new monster could not fail to fascinate the child in Dickens, and we have that exciting account of how 'the train rattled among the housetops, and among the ragged sides of houses torn down to make room for it, and over the swarming streets, and under the fruitful earth, until it shot across the river, bursting over the quiet surface like a bomb-shell, and gone again as if it had exploded in the rush of smoke and steam and glare. A little more, and again it roared across the river, a great rocket.'

The reference to the director of companies flying about the country on business about which he probably knew next to nothing may remind us of another important aspect of change: the passing of industry into the control of financiers. Dr. Johnson had defined the stockbroker as 'a low wretch who lives by buying and selling the funds', from which we may gather that Dr. Johnson himself had no aptitude for this kind of business. But in Dickens's time the boom following the Napoleonic wars had produced a character who might be said to be dizzily and precariously high rather than wretchedly low. This figure is represented in Dickens by Wilkins Flasher Esquire, the stockbroker in *Pickwick Papers*, who was implicated in six hundred and twenty-four newly promoted companies, most of which were doomed to lives as short as those of the majority of Mrs. Gamp's babies. Boom and depression were on each other's heels during the

whole of Dickens's life, but particularly in the 'thirties and 'forties of the century. But in spite of this, the new middle-class gradually established itself, and a different and more self-consciously respectable mode of life came into vogue, in which the women—where they matter at all—wear lace caps and cambric aprons, and sit in porches entwined with honeysuckle awaiting the return of their excessively respected husbands, who alight from cabs at prettily painted wicket-gates. The setting of such scenes might be no farther afield than Islington or Highgate; but that was far enough in those days. The various social groups were already being segregated according to income and calling into small urban and suburban divisions, which, although within a stone's throw of each other, belonged to different worlds.

But for all his sentimentality Dickens was ready to face hard facts, and Daniel Webster said that he had done more by his writings to ameliorate the condition of the English poor than all the statesmen in Parliament; while Baldwin Brown, in 1853, said that the three great social agencies of the time were the cholera, the London Mission, and the works of Charles Dickens.

Dickens, as we shall recall in a moment, had good reason to know the sufferings of the poor in the overcrowded conditions of his age, and from the beginning he missed no opportunity to make them known to others. It is something that must be remembered to his credit. The natural tendency of a man who has known poverty and unhappiness in youth, and in spite of a bad start has succeeded in establishing himself in life, is to draw a curtain across the past and say nothing about it to his new and more fortunate associates. Dickens resisted the temptation. There was no need for him to drag the subject of the treatment of debtors into so cheerful a chronicle as *Pickwick Papers*; but he did. It is true that the subject had a topical value which as a born journalist he could not lose sight of. Percy FitzGerald reminds us that in the month in which the first number of *Pickwick* appeared the Warden of the Fleet wrote to *The Times* to say that he was unaware of such sums as a guinea

and a half being frequently paid for a room, as had been alleged, and to deny that four or five persons were often crammed into a single apartment. Nevertheless, Dickens might have decided that the subject was too personal for him to tamper with just when he was starting out on his career as a man of letters. He was still in his twenties when the three novels in which he expressed what is sometimes called his Radicalism, *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *The Old Curiosity Shop* appeared. ✎

In essentials, Dickens's plea for social justice might not be thought much different from Robert Owen's. But it was, in fact, quite different from both the politician's and the preacher's, and, as so often in Dickens, for personal rather than logical reasons. How could he believe in reform by law after what he had seen in Doctors' Commons and described in *Bleak House*? What faith could he have in what came to be called the Nonconformist Conscience after he had himself sat under Chadbands and Stigginses and weighed them in the balance in his keen practical mind? On the other hand he had far more faith than most reformers-by-system in the inherent goodness of the common people. He believed with all his heart in the Gospel of Goodwill, which those of other persuasions call sentimentality or woolly-minded optimism. Personally I am not at all sure that he did not show his astuteness by his refusal to accept the oversimplified nostrums of his age. It is not the purpose of this book to discuss him as a social reformer; but if it were I frankly admit that I should be on the side of Dickens against the rationalizers.

There are, of course, obvious weaknesses in the Dickensian cures. Dickens himself would probably have agreed that there never were, and never will be, enough Brothers Cheeryble to secure the poor from want. It will be recalled that when Mr. Trimmers called to solicit aid for 'the widow and family of a man who was killed in the East India Docks this morning, Sir. Smashed Sir, by a cask of sugar,' Mr. Cheeryble benevolently observed: 'Trimmers is one of the best friends we have. He makes a thousand cases known to us that

we should never discover of ourselves.' Even Mr. Trimmer Butler, or whatever the Chancellor of the Exchequer's name happens to be, is not viewed with such benevolence by more than a very small minority today, and we may all doubt whether the Brothers Cheeryble would have been able to stand up to modern competition. But Dickens had no illusions here. The darker side of personal benevolence, in its guise of cold charity, is drawn in the most harrowing detail time after time. Nor had he any illusions about its by-products, such as the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates.

In the same way he probably saw the wastefulness of having such a large part of the population inadequately educated and thus leaving a vast reservoir of talent and energy—in which he had such faith—untapped, otherwise he would not have satirized such an attitude as that of Mr. Dombey, who after educating the engine-driver's son 'Biler—christened Robin—him as you was so good as to make a Charitable Grinder on', with such lamentable results to Rob the Grinder:

"A son of this man's whom I caused to be educated, major," said Mr. Dombey, giving him his arm. "The usual return!"

"Take advice from plain old Joe and never educate that sort of people, sir," returned the major. "Damme, sir, it never does! It always fails!"

Equally he knew how much humbug there was about the Podsnap attitude:

"I must decline to pursue this painful discussion. It is not pleasant to my feelings. I have said that I do not admit these things. I have also said that if they do exist (not that I admit it) the fault lies with the sufferers themselves. It is not for *me* . . . to impugn the workings of Providence. I know better than that, I trust, and I have mentioned what the intentions of Providence are. Besides . . . the subject is a very disagreeable one. I will go so far as to say it is an odious one. It is not one to be introduced among our wives and young persons, and I——" He finished with that

flourish of his arm which added more expressively than any words, "and I remove it from the face of the Earth."'

✓ On the whole, Dickens is fair to Mr. Podsnap. He is not portrayed as a wicked man, and when he has to act in a vital matter he acts rightly. But Dickens saw that the Podsnap attitude was quite absurd in the conditions of contemporary life. In short, that the Podsnaps were played out. Oh, no, Dickens was no fool in weighing up his pros and cons.

There is no denying that there were some queer quirks in Dickens's mind, though I am not in the least persuaded that they were sinister in their implications. Horrors fascinated him. There is no denying that. He enjoyed being shocked and revelled in righteous indignation. He strongly disapproved, for example, of public executions, and said so in the *Daily News*, the newspaper he founded. But he attended them in England, and subsequently in both America and Italy, so that he could compare the scenes with those at the hanging of the Mannings on the walls of Horsemonger Lane Gaol in November 1849, of which he wrote to Cerjat: 'The conduct of the people was so indescribably frightful, that I felt for some time afterwards almost as if I were living in a city of devils.' But that does not mean that he was not enjoying himself. This sort of thing, however, does not amount to anything more serious than the emotional immaturity already noted. Moreover it is only fair to say that this preoccupation with evil was widespread in Victorian England, and partly for a perfectly good reason, namely, the desire to reform. The blood was again beginning to circulate in the nation's social conscience, and the enlightened were becoming increasingly aware of the rottenness of much of their way of life, both private and public. They could recognize, for example in the three boroughs of Mr. Merdle in *Little Dorrit*, 'three little rotten holes in this Island containing three little ignorant, drunken, guzzling, dirty out-of-the-way constituencies that had reeled into Mr. Merdle's pocket', because they knew such places themselves and were just becoming alive to the disgrace of them.

CHARLES DICKENS BIRTHPLACE
FEBRUARY 7TH 1812



Evening News and Hampshire Tele
393 COMMERCIAL ROAD, PORTSMOUTH



J. Chettleby

48 DOUGHTY STREET, LONDON

But much of the reaction was personal to Dickens and was not widely shared. And if it did not always improve him as a reasonable being, it had an interesting effect on him as an artist. It was a natural condition, and Nature has a way of supplying her own remedies. What was lost in security was gained in sensitivity and quickness of wit. The void in Dickens caused by his loss of security in childhood created a vacuum which sucked in life wherever he found it, so that the outward world came to compensate for what was lost within.

The upshot of this was that his work, more than that of most writers, became a reflection of workaday life. Like Shakespeare he held the mirror up to Nature. It was a mirror less polished and glowing than Shakespeare's. At times it was a distorting mirror. But the figures that cast the reflections were always actual. Indeed the England of Dickens is before everything else an England of characters—an England teeming with life as varied and virile as England—and in particular London—had known for a long time. In his youth it was the loose, undisciplined England of the Regency—the England of the London Pleasure Gardens, and of such hilarious beanfeasts as those of Greenwich and Bow. Dickens did not in fact take kindly to the reformed England of the great queen. He describes his business in life in a passage in *The Uncommercial Traveller*. 'I am both a town traveller and a country traveller,' he says, 'and am always on the road. Figuratively speaking, I travel for the great house of Human Interest Brothers, and have rather a large connection in the fancy goods way. Literally speaking, I am always wandering here and there from my rooms in Covent Garden, London—now about the city streets, now about the country by-roads—seeing many little things, and some great things, which, because they interest me, I think may interest others.'

It must be admitted that the Dickensian world contains a disproportionate number of solicitors in dusty chambers, always plotting some devilry or other, and that it has too

many slums and workhouses and horrifying schools. But it is the truth that there were a great many lawyers of that kind in his day, and that all through his lifetime the countryside was being impoverished and the towns growing larger and dirtier. This, to Dickens, was a frightening portent, because he was conservative enough to believe that the life that was lived in the inns and manor houses of the older England was the happiest life imaginable. In contrast to the settled ways reflected in the life at Cob Tree Manor, for example, where everyone was at peace with himself and his neighbours, he saw the growth of a new philosophy of life based on a creed of insatiable greed—the 'Much wants More' philosophy of Coketown. It is arguable that Dickens was himself infected by this new philosophy and had a guilty conscience about it, although this may have been overstated recently. Personally I think he was generous to his wastrel relatives and none-too-prudent offspring. Anyone in these days is good enough for an Aunt Sally, and it could not be expected that Dickens would get off scot-free. Hilaire Belloc once wrote:

*When I am dead I hope it may be said
His sins were scarlet, but his books were read.*

With Dickens it seems to be argued that his sins must have been scarlet precisely because his books were read. In short, his very fertility of imagination has become a cause of offence in him, and perhaps it may be conceded that at first glance Dickens does appear to have an undisciplined imagination.

With writers who concentrate on the contemporary scene the artistic principle is usually shown in selection. Dickens, we may think, was less selective than a great artist ought to be. Mentally, he was a greedy feeder at life's table, with an insatiable appetite for every kind of fare, and a preference for dishes that were spicy and highly seasoned. The tables of his fancy, we may argue, were too loaded, his guests too numerous and ill chosen for good mixing. Personally, I have no quarrel with him here. I

agree that he had little sense of gentility, and I confess that like most men I find his women insufferable, particularly the sweethearts, or what Sir Gerald Kelly would call the sweetie-pies. But if we examine his scores of superb thumb-nail sketches of men and old women we find that in his methods he is extremely selective and discriminating. Invariably his practice is to throw one aspect, or at most two or three aspects, of a character into relief, and to leave the rest in shadow. In short, selection is of the very essence of his genius when it comes to sketching.

There is more of the artist in Dickens than most of his critics appear to recognize. Because he has been the idol of the Philistines for a hundred years, enjoying as a novelist popularity unmatched in the history of the world, it is loosely assumed that he is not for the more fastidious reader. It is true that he is not for the highbrow. He never intended to be. Indeed he loathed highbrows and 'literary' people generally, because he found them so intolerant. He liked a world that had room in it for everybody. He rejoiced in God's plenty. As the Boffins put it:

'The world's wide enough for all of us,' said Mrs. Boffin, 'when not literary. But when so, not so.'

Highbrow and broadbrow would probably agree that the brilliance of his character-drawing is of prime importance in any analysis of his genius. Few of the novels have plots worth talking about. As he lacked learning, the historical faults of the more ambitious novels of his later years detracts from their appeal to some of us. But everyone will agree that for insight into character and fertility of creative imagination he is unsurpassed among novelists. And this insight into character applies to places as well as persons. For this reason the topography of Dickens is not the incidental thing it is in most writers. It is fundamental. There were, quite literally, sermons in stones for him, particularly in the grimy stones of East London, or the slimy riverside steps. If he is sometimes more concerned to relay those sermons than to describe with topographical precision the stone, that is no matter for complaint. Any number of

people can botanize and particularize; only rarely do we find one who can release the imprisoned spirit.

So while Dickens may not be a regional novelist in quite the way that Hardy is, he has an equal gift for catching the unique character of a place. It is, no doubt, unfair to compare Hardy and Dickens in this respect because the one was the novelist of rural, the other of urban England, and the town has changed more quickly than the country; but in marrying person and place Dickens was the greater artist, intimately as Hardy knew his Dorset. Where most novelists tie their characters together with a plot, in Dickens they are held together by a curious magnetism of atmosphere, which is evoked by a combination of person and place. Confronted with Rochester Castle, he does not conjure up scenes of Norman England or relate the structure to others of its time and period, as some of us would—Hedingham in Essex, for example—nor yet to its builder and his connection with the Tower of London, or to that gem of a Norman castle at West Malling in Kent, which he must have known well, since West Malling is one of the claimants to the honour of being the Muggleton of *Pickwick Papers*. Not at all. He brings it into his own romantic world and writes: 'Centuries have so defaced the apertures in its walls that the ruin looks as if the rooks and daws had picked his eyes out.'

When we begin to think about the topography of Dickens we think first of his favourite inns and of the countryside peopled with plump and rubicund folk—the old benign and bespectacled, the young chirpy and full of life. As likely as not they will be people he had met in Kent, for which he had a special affection. But not necessarily. Dickens knew his England better than most. After Kent he knew Essex and East Anglia best, although he could write and talk knowledgeably of the country as far north as the North Riding of Yorkshire, and westward either through Shrewsbury into Wales or southward through Sussex and Hampshire to Cornwall. Always, however, the nerve-centre is London.

Before people began to travel regularly such peregrina-

tions as those of Mr. Pickwick were largely for antiquarian purposes. At least, they had been since the Reformation. Previously they had more often been undertakings of piety. Then came the romantic travellers who developed a particular and somewhat esoteric attitude towards landscape. It was Dickens who put the whole nation on intimate terms with a vast range of the most characteristic aspects of landscape and humanized it. Somebody said that Wordsworth had left such an impression on the English Lake District that we can no longer look at its lakes and mountains without seeing his great Roman nose in the foreground. That was true for my generation, and certainly for me personally. What then has Dickens done for us as interpreter of the English landscape? The answer, I trust, will be amplified in the following chapters; but briefly, he has shown us, as he himself wrote in an advertisement for *Pickwick Papers* drawn up in March 1838: 'High-roads and bye-roads, towns and villages, public conveyances and their passengers, first-rate inns and roadside public-houses, races, fairs, regattas, elections, meetings, market days—all the scenes that can possibly occur to enliven a country place, and at which different traits of character may be observed, and recognized.'

CHAPTER II

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

THE grandfather of Charles Dickens was a William Dickens, who, after serving for a time as footman, married Elizabeth Ball, housemaid to Lady Blandford, and became steward to John Crewe, Esq., Member of Parliament for Chester. Such an appointment in the second half of the eighteenth century, when landed interests were still dominant, would carry social status comparable with that of a managing director today. Stewards were frequently drawn from the younger sons of good families, and while there is no reason to suppose that William Dickens had aristocratic connections, simply to say, as some have done, that the grandparents of Dickens were in domestic service, is to give a wrong impression to those who do not know the set-up of eighteenth-century life. Certainly we may assume that both William Dickens and his wife were able and responsible persons who stood well with their employers, because when William Dickens died at a comparatively early age his widow was appointed housekeeper, and held the position for thirty-five years.

John Dickens, the novelist's father, was the second son of William and Elizabeth, and as he was born in the year of his father's death he may have received more of his mother's affection than was good for him. At all events, he grew up to be a clever and resourceful man, yet so foolish and self-willed that he threw away the advantages of a secure and honourable profession simply by refusing to observe Mr. Micawber's maxim, that with twenty pounds a year income, nineteen pounds, nineteen shillings and sixpence expenditure means happiness, twenty pounds and sixpence misery. If William Dickens, the steward, had lived, that, we may imagine, would have been the first lesson in

economics he would have taught his sons. But John Dickens ought to have needed it less than most. The difficulty that some of us have in not knowing whether we shall, in fact, have the twenty pounds to spend, did not worry him, because whatever he missed in other directions, he began on the right foot when it came to earning a living. By the influence of the Crewe family he obtained a clerkship in the Navy Pay-Office, an appointment on a par with a civil service post of comparable grade today, and it was in this capacity that he went to Portsmouth, where, in June 1809, he took over the tenancy of 1 Mile End Terrace, now 393 Commercial Road, Landport, at an annual rental of £35 a year. As his salary at the time was only £110 a year, this was more than a sensible man would have been willing to pay, apart from the fact that it was considerably more than the house was worth. It is possible, however, that his wife's family, who were in comfortable circumstances, assisted. The environment, therefore, into which Charles was born at this Mile End Terrace address on the 7 February, 1812, as the second child of his parents, was of typical middle-class respectability. The hour of his birth, incidentally, was a few minutes before midnight, the time of David Copperfield's birth, which makes this the first of the innumerable autobiographical incidents used to give point to his fiction.

Four months later, that is to say, in June 1812, the Dickenses moved to No. 16 Hawke Street, a tall house of three storeys above ground and a basement below, approached by a flight of steps, where they remained for exactly two years—from Midsummer Day 1812, to Midsummer Day 1814. Again their home was in a good residential district, which the growth of Portsmouth has since disfigured. The house was destroyed by enemy action in the Second World War.

In the summer of 1814 John Dickens was recalled to London and Portsmouth ceased to be the family home. We may take it, therefore, that although he is said to have remembered events in his childhood there, Dickens means far more to Portsmouth than Portsmouth can ever have

meant to Dickens. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that it was a matter of no consequence that he was born there. Naval associations and the trade and traffic of ports continued to be vital to him all his life. Their social life always intrigued him. 'Queer place,' said Jingle of Chatham, the other pap that gave Dickens suck, 'Dock-yard people of upper rank don't know Dock-yard people of lower rank—Dock-yard people of lower rank don't know small gentry—small gentry don't know tradespeople—Commissioner don't know anybody.' So it undoubtedly was when Dickens was a small boy, and as his father was a man with social aspirations these restrictions must have been frustrating.

If the Admiralty had not had other designs for John Dickens, the district of Landport as it was in those days would have been a stimulating environment for his children to grow up in. It was then in the suburbs, with open country and such places as Cosham and Porchester Castle within easy reach on the one hand, and on the other all the excitement of a naval station. We have an indication of what this would have meant to Charles in Forster's story of how when he and Dickens visited Portsmouth while *Nicholas Nickleby* was being written, Dickens recognized the exact shape of the military parade seen as an infant. Such, assuming he was telling the truth, had been the intensity of his reaction to it when less than two years old. And while Dickens remembered Portsmouth, Portsmouth did not forget Dickens. When the last surviving daughter of the owner of No. 393 Commercial Road died in 1903, after having made it her home for many years, the house was bought by Portsmouth Town Council for use as a Dickens Museum. Moreover a stained-glass window in Portsea Parish Church preserves the memory of his baptism in the church of which it is the granddaughter. The parish register, incidentally, reminds us that he was given three names at the font: Charles John Huffam (erroneously spelt 'Huffham' in the register). The first, his maternal grandfather's, he retained; the second, his father's, and the third, his godfather's, he discarded. But as Christopher Huffam, his godfather, was a

'Rigger in His Majesty's Navy', who lived in Limehouse Hole, it was a connection of biographical importance. The font, by the way, after lying about in a builder's yard for many years, is now in the modern church of St. Alban.

Dickens's visits to Portsmouth in adult life were few. He was there with Forster in 1838 in search of local colour for the Crummbles scene in *Nicholas Nickleby*, in which Nicholas and Smike arrived at the drawbridge with Mr. Vincent Crummbles, and arrangements were made at once for their accommodation.

'Thanking Mr. Vincent Crummbles for his obliging offer, Nicholas jumped out, and, giving Smike his arm, accompanied the manager up High Street on their way to the theatre; feeling nervous and uncomfortable enough at the prospect of an immediate introduction to a scene so new to him.'

The lodgings found for Nicholas were over a tobacconist's shop in The Hard, not far from Hawke Street, while 'Mr. Crummbles lived in Saint Thomas's Street, at the house of one Bulph, a pilot, who sported a boat-green door, with window-frames of the same colour, and had the little finger of a drowned man on his parlour mantel-shelf, with other maritime and natural curiosities. He displayed also a brass knocker, a brass plate, and a brass bell-handle, all very bright and shining; and had a mast, with a vane on the top of it, in his back yard.' The theatre and its properties were to fascinate Dickens all his life. He never tired of describing its scents and thrills—such as the 'strong smell of orange-peel and lamp-oil, with an under-current of sawdust', and the succession of playbills, canvas screens and paint-pots that pointed the way to the stage of the Portsmouth Theatre, which stood in High Street.

Apart from these vivid and nostalgic memories—which were obviously his parents' memories, not his own—the references to Portsmouth in the novels amount to little. We are told in *Great Expectations* that Magwitch, the returned convict, landed at Portsmouth under the assumed name of Provis, and there is a passing mention of the place

in *The Uncommercial Traveller*. If there are others, they elude me. But there was a personal connection that must not be overlooked. Sydney, the novelist's son, often referred to as 'The Admiral', went on board the *Britannia* at Portsmouth in October 1860, as a young naval cadet, and a proud father described him as being 'all eyes and gold lace'.

On his recall to London, John Dickens lived for a short time in lodgings in Norfolk Street, now Cleveland Street, on the east side of the Middlesex Hospital; but little is known of this period. The next important move was to Chatham, which Forster says was in 1816. The following year John Dickens took over the tenancy of 2, afterwards 11, Ordnance Terrace, a house on the boundary between Chatham and Rochester, which, no doubt, led to discussions in the household as to the precise line of this boundary. Anyhow, long afterwards Dickens was to say: 'If anybody present knows to a nicety where Rochester ends and Chatham begins, it is more than I do.'¹ There the family were happy and united—indeed it was probably the happiest household Dickens was ever to know. John Dickens's salary was now £200 a year, which in 1817 ought to have been more than adequate for his needs. In 1819 it was increased to £350, the figure at which it remained until he left the service in 1825. It would be difficult to say what such a salary would represent in present-day currency; but it would be well into four figures—particularly if in making the calculation we bear in mind both income tax and the undoubted fact that there are far more ways of spending money today than there were in 1817. Anyhow, the Dickens's home was far from being a poor one, and must have had the appearance of being a rich one, because John Dickens was already living beyond his means, entertaining lavishly and enjoying his local reputation as 'a fellow of infinite humour, chatty, lively, and agreeable', as he was described by William Thomas Wright, who was head of the Navy Pay-Office at Chatham at the time John Dickens was there, while to their maid, Mary Weller, upon whom the character of Peggotty

¹ *Household Words*, Christmas Number, 1854.

was modelled, the Dickenses were 'a most genial, loveable family, with something more than a ghost of gentility hovering in their company'.

Mary Weller, who became Mrs. Gibson, long outlived her brilliant charge. She died at the age of eighty-four in the spring of 1888, and her favourite topic as an old lady was the time she spent with the Dickens family at Ordnance Terrace. Nothing, it is said, in her last years delighted her more than to have Master Charles's novels read to her, and during these readings she would listen intently, interrupting from time to time to speculate on the original of one of the characters. About Mr. and Mrs. Micawber there could be no doubt whatever. They were obviously Mr. and Mrs. Dickens, both of whom she remembered with affection. In fact, she referred to Mrs. John far more tenderly than ever Dickens himself did! She recognized something of Charles in David Copperfield, and no doubt had her suspicions about Peggotty. It is from Mary Weller that we have the familiar picture of Charles as a delicate child retiring to an upper room of the house they next occupied, the house on the Brook, to pore over his books while his friends romped outside. At such times, she said, she would often hear him acting to a silent audience of chairs and furniture, which he personified with life, and turned into the characters of the book he was then reading. It must have been here that he acquired the lifelong habit of giving personality to chattels. Elsewhere we have the similar portrait of him as 'a not very robust child, sitting in bye-places, near Rochester Castle, with a head full of Partridge, Strap, Tom Pipes and Sancho Panza'. No one can doubt that Chatham was, what Forster called it, the birthplace of his fancy.

Besides Mary Weller there were other close friends among neighbours in Ordnance Terrace, all of whom, apparently, were on good terms with the Dickenses. At No. 5 there was Mrs. Newnham, who appears as The Old Lady in *Sketches by Boz*, and later served as model for the fantastic portrait of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*.

Apparently she was the kind of generous and slightly eccentric old lady who lives in an old-fashioned house crowded with knick-knacks, and likes to show her treasures to young neighbours. We have all known the kind as children, and sat patiently on the edge of their frail mahogany chairs until the moment arrived for a piece of cake or chocolate to be produced, which, bless their hearts, they probably knew was all we were waiting for! It was rather unkind, perhaps, to turn her into Miss Havisham, but that was the way the mature imagination of Dickens worked. At 1 Ordnance Terrace lived the Stroughills, one of whom, George, though older than Charles, was his best friend at the time, while Lucy Stroughill—*Golden Lucy*—was his first sweetheart. And there were others. The names of any number of Dickens's characters are to be found in Chatham parish registers—Sowerby, Tapley, Wren, Jasper, Weller and so on.

As for Chatham itself, it had everything a youngster could desire. There was the Navy Pay-Office yacht, in which Charles and his friends would be taken down the Medway to Sheerness, and from which he would see the convict hulk lying off the dockyard. It was the mysterious prison ship from which came the long files of convicts he used to see marching under military guard to and from their work in the dockyard. As a rule it was a sight that made him shudder, but here he learned the value of comic relief in describing the gruesome. For example, the convicts would often be required to carry long planks of wood on their shoulders, and when this was done Charles noticed that there was nearly always the bantam cock of a man who fell into line between taller comrades, and grinned with satisfaction as he marched along with his shoulders two or three inches below the plank. These convict gangs are mentioned in *Great Expectations* (Chapter XXVIII) where we watch them 'with great numbers on their backs as if they were street doors'. When Pip asks: 'And please, what's hulks?' his sister replies: 'Hulks are prison ships right 'cross the meshes. People are put in the Hulks because they murder, and because they rob, and forge, and do all sorts

of bad; and they always begin by asking questions,' which was probably the answer Mary Weller gave.

We realize what a deep impression the Chatham convicts made on his young mind by noting the things he remembered about them. Their smell, for instance: how when they were being transported by coach, passengers on the box seat would become aware of their presence by their 'bringing with them that curious flavour of bread-poultice, baize, rope-yarn and hearth-stone, which attends the convict presence'. And besides the convicts there were the genial, friendly workpeople of the dockyard, the rope-makers, anchor-smiths, and block-makers. Above all there were the 'Lines', as the local fortifications were called, where he could watch the sham fights and what must have appeared to him to be brilliant displays of military tactics, as well as reviews of the 43rd and 52nd Light Infantry. This, we recall, was where certain eminent Pickwickians got into trouble.

Mr. Pickwick's impression was that the chief products of the Chatham and Rochester neighbourhood were 'soldiers, sailors, Jews, chalk, shrimps, offices, and dockyard men', and in *One Man in a Dockyard*¹ the entire bustling scene is described: 'Men are noticeable,' we learn, 'by scores, by hundreds, by thousands, rank and file, companies, regiments, detachments, vessels full for exportation. They walked about the streets in rows or bodies, carrying their heads in exactly the same way, and doing exactly the same thing with their limbs. Nothing in the shape of clothing was made for an individual, everything was contracted for the millions. The children of Israel were established at Chatham, as salesmen, outfitters, tailors, old clothesmen, army and navy accoutrement makers, bill discounters, and general despoilers of the Christian world, in tribes rather than in families.'

But at the heart of this exciting regimental world there was one man at large who was an individualist—garrulous, splendid, larger-than-life John Dickens himself, who must have been a wonderful hero to a delicate ambitious youngster.

¹ *Household Words*, 6 September, 1851.

And next to Chatham was Rochester, a town as demonstrative as Chatham was reserved. If we study the references to these two places we see how sharply contrasted they were in Dickens's mind. In *The Uncommercial Traveller* Chatham is described as having 'a gravity upon its red brick offices and houses, a staid pretence of having nothing to do, an avoidance of display, which I never saw out of England', while to David Copperfield, who passed through the town on his way to visit his aunt, Miss Betsy Trotwood, who lived at Dover, it was 'a mere dream of chalk, and draw-bridges, and mastless ships in a muddy river, roofed like Noah's arks'. But no one could describe Rochester High Street as dull. And there, most incredible of all, to a young boy, was the public clock, 'the queer old clock that projects over the pavement out of a grave red building, as if Time carried on business there, and hung out his sign'. Elsewhere he tells us that he had supposed it to be the finest clock in the world, but it 'turned out to be as inexpressive, moon-faced and mean a clock as ever I saw', which only means that he was playing games with it as he did with Miss Havisham. As for the building behind it: 'The edifice,' he says, 'had appeared to me in those days so glorious a structure that I had set it up in my mind as the model on which the Genie of the Lamp built the Palace of Aladdin. A mean little brick heap, like a demented chapel, with a few yawning persons in leather gaiters, and in the last extremity for something to do, lounging at the door with their hands in their pockets, and calling themselves a Corn Exchange.'

The cathedral did not mean much to him in those days—if ever. The castle would excite his imagination, although what he needed most was life and movement. For this reason the river and the bridge must have had a stronger appeal. He would walk along the bank with his father and have the shipping explained to him. It was only in after-life that he realized that all had not been well with his childhood, and that his father had not been the wonderful creature he had appeared to be. He owed to Washington Irving that he had been a 'very small and not-over-

particularly-taken-care-of boy'. We know that his mother taught him to read, but most of the time he seems to have been left to himself, or in the care of the dearest companion of his childhood, his sister, Fanny, which may not have been as bad for him as some might think. Children can suffer from excess of parental affection. Smother love can be quite as bad as neglect. It would be in his lonely moments that he would really savour the character of the busy riverside town that was to become so important to him, with its smell of pitch, tar, coals, and rope-yarn, and all its characteristic sights and sounds.

That he did take walks with his father we know from the story of how he first fell in love with Gad's Hill Place, his last home. It has often been told. It relates how, when as a boy, his father used to take him walking in that direction, and when they reached the crest they would pause to admire the view of shipping on the distant river and the fine house that stood there. At such times the improvident father would tell his son that if he worked hard enough he might one day live in such a house. The experience is elaborated in one of the sketches:

'So smooth was the old high road, and so fresh were the horses, and so fast went it, that it was midway between Gravesend and Rochester, and the widening river was bearing the ships, white-sailed or black-smoked, out to sea, when I noticed by the way-side a very queer small boy.

' "Holloa!" said I, to the very queer small boy, "where do you live?"

' "At Chatham," says he.

' "What do you do there?" says I.

' "I go to school," says he.

'I took him up in a moment, and we went on. Presently, the very queer small boy says, "This is Gad's Hill we are coming to, where Falstaff went out to rob those travellers, and ran away."

' "You know something about Falstaff, eh?" said I.

' "All about him," said the very queer small boy. "I am old (I am nine), and I read all sorts of books. But *do*

let us stop at the top of the hill, and look at the house there, if you please!"

"You admire that house?" said I.

"Bless you, sir," said the very queer small boy, "when I was not more than half as old as nine, it used to be a treat for me to be brought to look at it. And now I am nine, I come by myself to look at it. And ever since I can recollect, my father, seeing me so fond of it, has often said to me, *If you were to be very persevering, and were to work hard, you might some day come to live in it.* Though that's impossible!" said the very queer small boy, drawing a low breath, and now staring at the house out of the window with all his might.

'I was rather amazed to be told this by the very queer small boy; for that house happens to be my house.'

Another place to which he was sometimes taken by his father was the Mitre Inn, where he would entertain the guests by singing sea shanties, or be stood on the dining-room table with his sister Fanny to sing duets. On these occasions he would see how popular his father was with his cronies, and first glimpse the time-honoured splendour with which to the end of his life he was to invest the English inn. The Mitre was not only the place where his wonderful father showed off to such advantage, it was renowned as the house at which Nelson stayed when he visited Chatham,¹ and the King himself, while Duke of Clarence, had stayed there.

In 1821 Mrs. Dickens's sister, Mrs. Allen, who was the widow of a naval commander, and had lived with the family, sharing expenses, married Dr. Lamert, surgeon at the Chatham Hospital, the original of Dr. Slammer in *Pickwick Papers*. This small loss of support should not have caused the family any financial embarrassment, but it was made the excuse for removal to a smaller house, 18 St. Mary's Place, known as The Brook, where Dr. Lamert's son by a former marriage boarded with them. The Dickens family itself was increasing rapidly. Three children were born to John and Elizabeth Dickens at Chatham, so one might have

¹ See 'The Guest', Christmas Number, *Household Words*, 1855.

expected them to need more room, rather than less. Evidently the pressure of John Dickens's extravagance was already beginning to tell. The plain little weather-boarded house into which they moved has now disappeared. It stood near the road leading from Chatham to Old Brompton. Here was the little upstairs room Mary Weller remembered as the scene of Charles's infant theatricals, the room described in *David Copperfield* as the place where the old novels were stored—*Roderick Random*, *Peregrine Pickle*, *Humphrey Clinker*, *Tom Jones*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Don Quixote*, *Gil Blas*, and *Robinson Crusoe*—on which his fancy fed.

When tired of reading, Charles and Fanny would gaze through the window towards the old graveyard, about which they used to make up stories. Again we have the source of something that was to fascinate Dickens all his life, the lore and atmosphere of graveyards. It might be a name inscribed on a stone, or a curious circumstance in an obscure life that had been piously recorded there, which set his imagination working. We think of Cooling, Bowes, Blunderstone, and many others. He was dreaming of the graveyard he could see from St. Mary's Place when he wrote in *David Copperfield*, 'The picture always rises in my mind of a summer evening, the boys at play in the churchyard, and I, sitting on my bed, reading as if for life. Every barn in the neighbourhood, every stone in the church, and every foot in the churchyard, had some association of its own in my mind connected with these books, and stood for some locality made famous in them.' The books, of course, were the novels mentioned a moment ago. It was also the graveyard that inspired in memory the story *A Child's Dream of a Star*, thought out in the course of a train journey from London to Brighton, thirty years later:

'There was once a child,' it goes, 'and he strolled about a good deal, and thought of a number of things. He had a sister, who was a child too, and his constant companion. These two used to wonder all day long. They wondered at the beauty of the flowers; they wondered at the height and blueness of the sky; they wondered at the depth of the

bright water; they wondered at the goodness and the power of God who made the lovely world.

'They used to say to one another sometimes, Supposing all the children upon earth were to die, would the flowers and the water and the sky be sorry? For, said they, the buds are the children of the flowers, and the little playful streams that gambol down the hillsides are the children of the water; and the smallest bright specks playing at hide-and-seek in the sky all night must surely be the children of the stars; and they would all be grieved to see their play-mates, the children of men, no more.

'There was one clear shining star that used to come out in the sky before the rest, near the church spire, above the graves. It was larger and more beautiful, they thought, than all the others, and every night they watched for it, standing hand in hand at a window. Whoever saw it first cried out, "I see the star!" and often they cried out both together, knowing so well when it would rise, and where. So they grew to be such friends with it that, before lying down in their beds, they always looked out once again to bid it good-night; and when they were turning round to sleep they used to say, "God bless the star!"'¹

This is to me one of the most sensitive of Dickens's recollections of childhood, but there are so many of them that we feel there can be no doubt about his happiness in those years, even if he was a somewhat neglected child.

In one thing he was exceptionally fortunate at Chatham. He was sent to a school conducted by a William Giles, son of the minister of Providence Baptist Chapel, which was next door to the house on the Brook, and in view of Dickens's lifelong prejudice against Nonconformist ministers it is good to find him remembering his early schoolmaster with so much gratitude. No doubt Giles's school, which was at the junction of Rhode Street with Best Street, adjoining Clover Street, was in his mind when he wrote in *David Copperfield* of one that was 'very gravely and decorously ordered, and on a sound system; with an appeal in everything, to the

¹ *Household Words*, Christmas Number, 1852.

honour and good faith of the boys, and an avowed intention to rely on their possession of those qualities, unless they proved themselves unworthy of it, which worked wonders'. At the time in question William Giles was still in his early twenties, and had only recently opened his school on the most enlightened and up-to-date principles. An educated and intelligent man, he belonged to a class by no means uncommon in those days, when the old grammar schools had become fossilized in their teaching methods and Non-conformist academies, such as could be found in all the larger towns round London, were introducing the new methods which were eventually to produce so many Radical leaders of high moral standard and keen intelligence. Non-conformity had become a factor to be reckoned with in public life by this time, and it was usually on the side of progress. There is not the slightest doubt about the great debt Dickens owed to William Giles, even though the period spent with him is to be reckoned in months rather than years. There is, however, one pathetic reminder of these days in Forster's life. The boys at Giles's School wore white beaver hats, and it may be recalled that in Chapter X of *David Copperfield* David says: 'Behold me on the morrow in a much worn little white hat.' Surely no novelist of such imaginative power as Dickens ever made greater use of the small, circumstantial details of his everyday life. 'But alas! those high and palmy days had taken to themselves boots, and were already walking off,' as we read in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

This promising springtime came to an end in 1822, that is to say, when Dickens was ten years old, with the second recall of John Dickens to London. Charles was left behind for a few weeks in the care of his schoolmaster; but the time soon came for him to follow, and we have many sad accounts of small boys taking lonely coach journeys—packed 'like game and forwarded carriage paid, to the Cross Keys, Wood Street, Cheapside, London'—all of which, no doubt, were based on his own feelings as he mounted the 'Blue Eyed Maid' and was carried to London. We remember how

in *Great Expectations* Pip took his place on the coach, in which, he says, 'There was no other inside passenger, and I consumed my sandwiches in solitude and dreariness, and it rained hard all the way, and I thought life sloppier than I expected to find it.' 'The journey from our town to the Metropolis,' he says in Chapter XIX, 'was a journey of about five hours. It was a little past mid-day when the four-horse stage-coach by which I was a passenger got into the ravel of traffic frayed out about the Cross Keys, Wood Street, Cheapside, London . . . The coach that had carried me away was melodiously called "Timpson's Blue-Eyed Maid", and belonged to Timpson, at the coach-office up-street . . . Timpson's was a moderate-sized coach-office (in fact, a little coach-office), with an oval transparency in the window, which looked beautiful by night, representing one of Timpson's coaches in the act of passing a milestone on the London road with great velocity, completely full inside and out, and all the passengers dressed in the first style of fashion, and enjoying themselves tremendously.' There is a similar account in *The Uncommercial Traveller*, written in June 1860, and in the third chapter of *Little Dorrit*; but there appears to be some dispute as to whether the coach in question was in fact the 'Blue-Eyed Maid' or the 'Commodore', the coach in which Mr. Pickwick and his companions took the return journey to Rochester. In any case, Timpson is undoubtedly only a very slight disguise of Simpson, who was a Chatham coach-proprietor, and the driver, Old Cholmeley (Chumley), was undoubtedly the original of Tony Weller.

CHAPTER III

SHADES OF THE PRISON HOUSE

WHEN the delicate, imaginative boy of eleven was rattled over Rochester Bridge in whichever coach it was that carried him to London, the 'Commodore' or 'The Blue-Eyed Maid', his heart was heavy. He was leaving behind him a world he had made his own by peopling it with the creatures of his fancy, and with it his schoolmaster, William Giles, who had taught him to set the sails of his eager young mind for voyages of discovery into boundless seas of knowledge. London by contrast seemed gloomy and dull. He had never been told that its streets were paved with gold, and if he had been he would not have believed the report. It is true that his parents and sister Fanny were in London, and that he loved them; but he would rather have had them in Chatham.

His new home, when he reached it, did not reassure him. It was 16, afterwards 141, Bayham Street, Camden Town, which Forster says was 'a mean, small tenement'. Others have had a different view of it. It was small in comparison with other new houses in the neighbourhood, which was then suburban; but probably no smaller than the house on the Brook, and he had never complained about that. The truth is that Charles disliked the Bayham Street house from the start. He tells us that a washerwoman lived next door, and a Bow Street runner opposite. He does not tell us that Engelhart and Francis Holl, well-known engravers, and Anglo Selous, the dramatist, lived in Bayham Street, and no one thought any the worse of them for it. Bayham Street had only been built about ten years when the Dickenses moved in. Beyond it were fields—a little worn perhaps, but with pleasant walks across them to such places as Copenhagen House. But Dickens was always

sensitive to atmosphere, and the neighbourhood in its transitional state may have been somewhat nondescript and depressing. Forster is probably right in saying that 'he felt crushed and chilled by the change from the life at Chatham, breezy and full of colour, to the little back garret in Bayham Street'. 'As I thought,' said Dickens himself on one occasion, 'in the little back-garret in Bayham Street, of all I had lost in losing Chatham, what would I have given—if I had had anything to give—to have been sent back to any other school, to have been taught something anywhere!' His health suffered from the change. His weak little body missed the invigorating air that blew in from Thanet and the Thames Estuary. But the mental and spiritual losses were more serious than the physical. In describing to Forster the almshouses at the top of the street, he confided that 'to go to this spot and look from it over the dust-heaps and dock-leaves and fields at the cupola of St. Paul's looming through the smoke was a treat that served him for hours of vague reflection afterwards'. Such a confession suggests a void that cannot be accounted for by the material change alone. The truth is that everything had changed for him. Instead of comfortable, affectionate Mary Weller—or Peggotty—there was a drab little maid from Chatham workhouse—the Marchioness of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. And as for friends and neighbours outside his own household, the only house in which he could be sure of a welcome was that of his godfather, Christopher Huffam, who is said to have been in his mind when he created several of his seafaring characters—Captain Cuttle, for instance, and Mr. Peggotty. His mother had relatives in London, but it is hardly likely that the improvident Dickenses were popular with them.

His parents, too, must have been much less cheerful than they had been. There was still £350 a year coming in regularly, but it was always spent in advance. So whatever Bayham Street was from the house-agent's point of view, and as No. 16 was pulled down in 1910 we cannot inspect it for ourselves, it came to stand for something poor and shamefaced in Dickens's mind, and it is what it meant to

him that matters. It was the place 'only a story high above the ground floor' where Mr. Micawber lodged, and where the Cratchits lived. Jemima Evans and the Toodles family lived near, and in Little College Street, 'a desolate place surrounded by fields and ditches', Heyling ran his victim to earth. Bayham Street itself was the 'little street near the Veterinary College at Camden Town', where Traddles lived, a street 'principally tenanted, as one of our clerks who lived in that direction informed me, by gentlemen students, who bought live donkeys, and made experiments on those quadrupeds in their private apartments'. The street, he adds, was 'not as desirable a one as I could have wished it to be, for the sake of Traddles. The inhabitants appeared to have a propensity to throw any little trifles they were not in want of into the road; which not only made it rank and sloppy, but untidy too, on account of the cabbage leaves.'

It may or may not have been untidy, but from the evidence of photographs we can accept as fair enough his description of the houses as being built 'on one monotonous pattern', which 'looked like the early copies of a blundering boy who was learning to make houses, and had not yet got out of his cramped brick-and-mortar pothooks'. All that we have to remind us of the site now is a tablet fixed by the Dickens Fellowship on a branch of the Hampstead General Hospital built there, but houses of similar design are numerous enough.

Whether the house was suitable or not, the stay of the Dickenses in Bayham Street was so short that it ought not to have mattered much either way. But then everything was short and insecure during this period. The insecurity was the disturbing factor. At Michaelmas, 1823, Mrs. Dickens took over the tenancy of 4 Gower Street North, a commodious six-roomed house with a basement kitchen, but this second London home was held only until Lady Day of the following year. Before it was demolished about 1895, 4 Gower Street North had been occupied for a time by a manufacturer of artificial eyes, a 'Mr. Venus', whose

'human eyes warious' figure in *Our Mutual Friend*, while next door was the dancing academy that served as a model for the one presided over by Mr. Turveydrop, the professor of deportment in *Bleak House*. Messrs. Maple's premises now occupy the site.

That the tenancy was in the name of Mrs. Dickens and not of her husband indicates a further deterioration in the family fortunes. She took it, in fact, with the object of supplementing income by conducting a school for young ladies, the pathetic result of which is described by Dickens in *David Copperfield*, where Mrs. Dickens becomes Mrs. Micawber.

'Poor Mrs. Micawber! She said she had tried to exert herself; and so, I have no doubt, she had. The centre of the street door was perfectly covered with a great brass plate, on which was engraved, "MRS. MICAWBER'S BOARDING ESTABLISHMENT FOR YOUNG LADIES"; but I never found that any young ladies had ever been to school there; or that any young lady ever came, or proposed to come; or that the least preparation was ever made to receive any young lady.'

Charles, it seems, tried to help the venture by distributing 'at a great many doors a great many circulars', setting out the merits claimed for the new academy, which is said to have had the blessing of Christopher Huffam, who, it is thought, may have guaranteed the rent for a time. If he did, even that was more than he could afford, because the general depression of 1823 and 1824 broke Huffam along with many other honest and hardworking men, reducing him to insolvency, which must have been a frightful thing to happen to such a man in the eyes of his godson. That his father should be making shipwreck of his life was hard but understandable. Even a boy of twelve must have understood that. But how could the downfall of his godfather, hitherto the symbol of benevolent prosperity, be explained?

Everyone who knew John Dickens recognized a more than common talent in him. Most of the virtues that made his son both famous and revered were present in his father,

but with the fatal addition of improvidence, which undid all. Undoubtedly Charles must have heard his father's character discussed, and time after time have heard it said that he was his own worst enemy, and so forth. In his oversharpened young brain he would see how the seeds of destruction were sown month by month by John Dickens, and afterwards watered—or should we say wined?—until they flourished as tares and destroyed all that was good in him. And in his love for his father Charles would flush with anger when he heard him criticized, and become protective and defensive. But neither he nor his weak little mother could avert the inevitable crisis. Is it not here that we see the beginnings of those elements in his novels that have made critics liken them to Greek tragedy on the one hand and to Dostoevsky on the other? Fate seems inexorable to his heroes, and so often the saint or hero has a curious weakness which finally drags him down.

One after another Charles's castles fell during this fatal year. His mother's school came to nothing, and the family misfortunes were brought to a head with the arrest of John Dickens, and his imprisonment for debt in the Marshalsea on 20 February, 1824. When this happened, everything in the home had to be valued, even to Charles's personal clothing. Describing the experience to Forster, he said: 'It was necessary, as a matter of form, that the clothes I wore should be seen by the official appraiser. I had a half-holiday to enable me to call upon him, at his own time, at a house somewhere beyond the Obelisk. I recollect his coming out to look at me with his mouth full, and a strong smell of beer upon him, and saying good-naturedly that "that would do", and "it was all right". Certainly the hardest creditor would not have been disposed (even if he had been legally entitled) to avail himself of my poor white hat, little jacket, or corduroy trousers.' Perhaps the only person completely unruffled throughout this melancholy month was John Dickens himself, who took his leave of the family by piously unburdening himself of a farewell message similar to that delivered by Mr. Micawber in comparable circumstances.

The humiliation of such an experience could not fail to have a permanent effect on a sensitive and high-spirited child. Charles had idolized his father. No relationship in the whole of his life was half so important as that between father and son. It was far more important than that with his gentle but ineffectual mother, or his kindly but equally ineffectual wife. It was more important than his relationships with his own children. Nor was it entirely tragic. The spark that was kindled to genius in him had descended through his father from his clever old grandmother, Mrs. William Dickens, who passed her retirement in rooms in Oxford Street, where Charles used to visit her. It was from this kind and shrewd old lady, who appears in *Bleak House* as Mrs. Rouncewell, housekeeper to Lady Dedlock of Chesney Wold, that he heard the old country tales which eventually found their way into the novels, and at the same time picked up some of the practical common sense that helped him to keep his own life comparatively steady—financially, if not emotionally. Something of the affection of these two for each other is shown in Charles's concern, when he had to appear before the official appraiser, about a watch she had given him. When this happened Charles saw himself, as he was later to describe David Copperfield, as 'a child of excellent abilities, and with strong power of observation, quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt, bodily or mentally'. He added: 'it seems wonderful to me that nobody should have made any sign on my behalf'.

Piece by piece the family furniture found its way to the pawnbrokers until Mrs. Dickens and her children were reduced to living in two rooms. In such an extremity there could be nothing surprising about a boy of twelve being put to a trade. Wrong as it might appear to us, nobody in 1824 would blame Mrs. Dickens for thinking the time had come for Charles to begin earning his keep. Nor was there any reason for the exaggerated self-pity with which Dickens came to regard the indignity of his first employment. On the other hand, that the son of a Navy Pay-Office clerk earning £350 a year should have been put into a blacking

warehouse probably was humiliating, and that so clever a boy should have been put there was in any case stupid. But the family were in desperate straits, and beggars never could be choosers. The boy himself we may well pity. The self-pitying man is quite another matter. He ought to have been able to look back on these four sad months—and there were only four of them—with amusement and pride that in this shiftless household he alone was able to do something effective.

The job, which was obtained for him by his connection by marriage, James Lamert, was the tying up and labelling of pots of paste-blackening in Warren's Blacking Factory at 30 Hungerford Stairs, which were north of the terrace separating Buckingham Street and York Building from the Victoria Embankment Gardens, with Hungerford Market on the opposite side of the road on a site now covered by part of Charing Cross railway station. The warehouse, or factory, was the last house on the left-hand side, and is described by Dickens as 'a crazy, tumble-down old house, abutting, of course, on the river, and literally overrun with rats. Its wainscotted rooms and its rotten floors and staircase, and the old grey rats swarming down in the cellars, and the sound of their squeaking and scuffling coming up the stairs at all times, and the dirt and decay of the place, rise up vividly before me, as if I were there again.' His memories of these distressing months, as everyone knows, are described with harrowing realism in the autobiographical chapters of *David Copperfield*.

As there appeared to be no likelihood of John Dickens being able to pay off his debts quickly, poor, helpless Mrs. Dickens took the drab little maid-of-all-work and the younger children to live with him in the Marshalsea, where his salary would enable him to secure for them all a certain degree of comfort. Imprisonment was not an unmixed evil. It gave him sanctuary from the importunate creditors and debt collectors who had pestered the life out of him for the past twelve months or more. Meanwhile Charles was placed in the care of a Mrs. Roylance, an old

lady in reduced circumstances who lived at 37 Little College Street, and it was she, he tells us, who, 'with a few alterations and embellishments, unconsciously began to sit for Mrs. Pipchin in *Dombey* when she took me in'. But Little College Street was too far from his parents for the homesick boy. So, when in April 1824 he begged to be allowed to live nearer the prison, lodgings were found for him in the house of an insolvent court agent in Lant Street, the Borough, where he occupied a back attic with a little window overlooking a timber yard. This, no doubt, was where the Tuggs family in *Sketches by Boz* lived.

In describing Lant Street in Chapter XXXII of *Pickwick Papers* as the place where Bob Sawyer found lodgings with the amiable Mrs. Raddle and her husband, Dickens says: 'There is a repose about Lant Street, in the Borough, which sheds a gentle melancholy upon the soul. There are always a good many houses to let in the street; it is a by-street, too, and its dullness is soothing. A house in Lant Street would not come within the denomination of a first-rate residence in the strict acceptation of the term, but it is a most desirable spot, nevertheless. If a man wished to abstract himself from the world, to remove himself from within the reach of temptation, to place himself beyond the possibility of any inducement to look out of the window, he should by all means go to Lant Street.' Today Lant Street could hardly be said to 'shed a gentle melancholy upon the soul'. A London County Council school, named the Charles Dickens School, occupies the site of the house overlooking the wood yard; but Lant Street lives in Dickens as one of the places where the more humble among London's workers lived and reared their families. It had, we learn, a few clear-starchers, one or two journeymen bookbinders, a few people employed in the docks, 'a handful of mantua-makers, and a seasoning of jobbing tailors'. But the majority of the inhabitants supported themselves either by letting off apartments or by taking in washing. 'The chief features in the still life of the street,' says Dickens, 'are green shutters, lodging-bills, brass door-plates, and bell-handles, the principal specimens of

animated nature, the pot-boy, the muffin youth, and the baked-potato man. The population is migratory, usually disappearing on the verge of quarter-day, and generally by night.'

The accommodation was probably poor enough, but he was nearer to his parents, and the head of the Lant Street household was the fat, good-natured old gentleman whose movements were curtailed by lameness, who along with his equally good-natured wife and their simple-minded son became the Garland family of *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

Dickens tells us that his usual way home from the blacking warehouse was over Blackfriars Bridge and along Charlotte Street, which, he used to recall, had 'Rowland Hill's chapel on one side, and the likeness of a golden dog licking a golden pot on the other'. In 1931 this famous sign was removed and is now in the Cuming Museum. During lunch hours he would wander about the neighbourhood storing up other impressions for use when the time came, particularly those of the Strand and Covent Garden. The noisy, crowded public-houses already fascinated him. Perhaps the one he saw most of was the little waterside tavern, the Fox-under-the-Hill, reached by an underground passage at the foot of Ivy Bridge Lane, a quaint precipitous alley which formed the boundary between the city of Westminster and the Liberty of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Savoy. It was alongside Salisbury stairs, and a popular rendezvous for those who used the 'half-penny boats'.

The pudding-shops and beef-houses in St. Martin's Lane and Drury Lane, a neighbourhood that in the eighteenth century had been known as Porridge Island, were other familiar haunts. One of these, Johnson's in Clare Court, comes into *David Copperfield*, where it is the 'famous alamode beef-house near Drury Lane', the one in which David grudgingly handed the waiter a halfpenny tip. 'There were two pudding-shops,' Dickens told Forster, 'between which I was divided, according to my finances.' In one, which stood in a now vanished court at the back of St. Martin's church, pudding was made with currants, 'and was a rather special

pudding', but dear. The other shop was in the Strand, where the pudding was cheaper, but was heavy and flabby, with a few big raisins set at great distances apart. This, we are told, was 'where the Lowther Arcade now is', but the Lowther Arcade, which ran from a point about midway between Bedford Street and Agar Street to St. Martin's church, has gone now—as indeed has most of the London of Charles Dickens.

One of the most memorable days for Charles in these dreary months was the one when he summoned up courage to go alone into a pub and order his first glass of ale, which he requested should have 'a good head to it'. The landlord looked him up and down suspiciously, 'with a strange smile on his face; and instead of drawing the beer, looked round the screen and said something to his wife, who came out from behind it, with her work in her hand, and joined him in surveying me'. How well he remembered the scene years afterwards in his study in Devonshire Terrace! There he saw them—'the landlord in his shirt-sleeves, leaning against the bar window-frame, his wife looking over the little half-door, and I, in some confusion, looking up at them from outside the partition. They asked me a good many questions, as what my name was, how old I was, where I lived, how I was employed, etc., etc. To all of which, that I might commit nobody, I invented appropriate answers. They served me with the ale, though I expect it was not the strongest on the premises; and the landlord's wife, opening the little half-door and bending down, gave me a kiss that was half-admiring and half-compassionate, but all womanly and good.'

Dickens had no friends of his own age at this time, although occasionally he would join Poll Green and Bob Fagin for lunch-hour games on the coal-barges. Usually he wandered alone on the Embankment, or among the back streets and courts about the Adelphi, loitering, perhaps dangerously, in the Adelphi arches. Sometimes on Saturday nights he would join a motley crowd pushing their way into a booth where a 'Fat Pig', a 'Wild Indian', or some other showman's wonder was being exhibited.

His impressions of the Marshalsea, and of other prisons he came to know later in life, are recalled in some of the most memorable passages in the novels. The Fleet, which was pulled down in 1872, is described in the fortieth chapter of *Pickwick Papers*, the King's Bench figures in *David Copperfield*, and scenes in *Little Dorrit* are laid in the Marshalsea. Those who are interested in Dickens as a craftsman might like to compare these various accounts, particularly that of the Fleet in *Pickwick* with that of the Marshalsea in *Little Dorrit*. By the time the latter was written his style had changed completely. Everything is described in detail and elaborated in a manner which the modern reader may well find tedious when compared with the lively, unlaboured realism of the presentation in *Pickwick* of the butcher, his friend, and the parson, whose noisome room Mr. Pickwick inspected. On the other hand, an essential part of Dickens's skill in topographical delineation is his flare for crystallizing the atmosphere or character of a place or a person, and of this the Marshalsea in *Little Dorrit* is an outstanding example.

John Dickens remained in the Marshalsea for three months, eight days. He was admitted on 20 February and released on 28 May on inheriting a legacy of £250, which came to him on the death of his mother in April. As soon as his brother had paid into court £40 in settlement of the particular debt for which he had been arrested, John Dickens was free to go, and he took his family to live with Mrs. Roylance in Little College Street while they looked for a new home. The ways of Providence must indeed have seemed inexplicable to Charles—if he troubled to consider them at this moment. Probably he didn't; but before we complain about the lack of logical sequence in the novels it is just as well to remember how illogical the early chapters of his own life were. Overjoyed as he was to know that his father's debts were paid—and that if only he would take to heart his own good counsel about the difference between happiness and misery being one shilling in twenty pounds all would be well with the family—there remained the

nightmare of the blacking warehouse. About the time of the family reunion, working conditions were improved by a transfer of the business from the rat-ridden premises by the river to Chandos Street, Covent Garden, where Charles, with his quick fingers and intelligent face, was set to work at a window overlooking the street. Again we have to add that the building has gone. It stood at the junction of Chandos Street and Bedford Street, opposite Messrs. J. M. Dent's publishing house. And those of us who have happy associations with that house—and what bookman has not in one capacity or another?—like to remember that Aldine House stands on the site of the White Swan, where Dickens bought his ale. 'The stones in the street,' he writes, 'may be smoothed by my small feet going across it at dinner-time and back again.' Not far from the White Swan, we might note, stood, and still stands, another tavern, the Marquis o' Granby.

It was a bitter disappointment to Charles that he was not allowed to leave the blacking factory on his father's release. For a time his mother insisted that he should stay on, notwithstanding that their circumstances were easier than they had been for several years before the arrest. Charles never forgave his mother for this. His father was more sympathetic, and after a quarrel with James Lamert, who had got him the miserable job, he was taken away and allowed to resume his education. But so bitter had the experience been that he once wrote, 'Until old Hungerford Market was pulled down, until old Hungerford Stairs were destroyed, and the very nature of the ground changed, I never had the courage to go back to the place where my servitude began.' Not only could he not endure the sight of the place, but the smell of the cement used for putting on the blacking-corks so filled him with loathing that when his business took him past the new warehouse in Chandos Street he invariably crossed over to the other side of the street, so that there would be no danger of his catching a whiff of it. His wife and family were never told of the episode, which continued to rankle in his mind until he was able to cleanse himself by making a full confession in

David Copperfield, ridding his system of the father complex by producing Mr. Micawber.

From Mrs. Roylance's house in Little College Street the Dickens moved to Hampstead, and in 1825 to 13, then 29, Johnson Street, Somers Town, where they remained, with the tenancy in the name of Caroline Dickens, until 1829. This small house in what even then was a poorer neighbourhood than the Dickens were accustomed to live in, was destroyed by enemy action during the last war.

By this time John Dickens had grown tired of his dull, respectable job at the Navy Pay-Office, and had applied for a superannuation grant on the score of ill health. The Admiralty enquired into this, and in due course granted release on compassionate grounds. His twenty years' service was taken into consideration, along with the fact that he was now responsible for the support of six children, and he was granted an annuity of £145 a year. Health, however, was not the sole factor behind the application for retirement from the service. John Dickens had already made fitful attempts at supplementing his income by journalism, and it is entirely to his credit that at the age of forty he had taken up shorthand—probably using his time in prison to gain proficiency. He had, in fact, become so quick and accurate that he secured a post as a Press reporter in Parliament for a newspaper called the *British Press*. Charles, who was already developing the same gifts of ready penmanship, must have felt vindicated in his admiration—now somewhat qualified—of his clever but erratic parent.

The school to which Charles was sent was the Wellington House Classical and Commercial Academy at the corner of Granby Street and Mornington Place, off Hampstead Road, where 'the boys', he tells us, 'trained the mice (white mice) better than the master trained the boys'. Here he remained for two years, describing the experience later in *David Copperfield*, where Wellington House becomes Salem House, and Mr. Creakle represents the irate Welshman named Jones who ran it. The same school is described in greater detail in *Household Words*, 11 October, 1851.

While Charles was at the Wellington House Academy his father's elder brother, William, died at the age of forty-three, leaving an estate of £1300 to be shared at his wife's death between the six children of his prodigal brother John.

On leaving school shortly before the Easter of 1827, Charles found employment with Charles Molloy, solicitor, of 6 Symonds Inn, later 4 New Square, Lincoln's Inn, with whom he remained for only six or seven weeks before obtaining, in May 1827, a clerkship with Messrs Ellis and Blackmore, solicitors, of 1 Raymond Buildings, Gray's Inn, with whom he remained until November 1828. During these months he lived with his parents at 17 The Polygon, Somers Town, where he placed Harold Skimpole in *Bleak House*, who lived, we are told, 'in a place called the Polygon, in Somers Town, where there were at that time a number of poor Spanish refugees, walking about in cloaks, smoking little paper cigars'. The Polygon was then 'in a state of dilapidation quite equal to our expectation. Two or three of the area railings were gone'. It was a group of houses in what is now Clarendon Square, adjoining Polygon Road.

Not far from the Polygon was the Seymour Street chapel, which Dickens seems to have attended at this time, and in connection with this period we have a personal recollection of him by Dr. Dawson, one of his schoolfellows, who says, 'I quite remember Dickens on one occasion heading us in Drummond Street in pretending to be poor boys, and asking the passers-by for charity—especially old ladies; one of whom told us she "had no money for beggar boys"'. On these adventures, when the old ladies were quite staggered by the impudence of the demand, Dickens would explode with laughter and take to his heels.'

Incidentally, it was while living at the Polygon that Mary Wollstonecraft died in giving birth to the child that became Mary Shelley.

The attraction the Law had for Dickens is evident throughout his writings; but the attraction of his father's new profession—or of his father in that new profession—was stronger. So, at the end of 1828, when he was nearly

seventeen, after a brief holiday with old friends near Chatham, he became a shorthand writer himself, hoping that in a short time he would be able to join his father as Parliamentary reporter for a daily newspaper. With this in view he resigned his clerkship and joined his cousin, Thomas Charlton, as a reporter in the Consistory Court of Doctors' Commons, where he remained for nearly two years, although it is clear that he must also have reported police cases in various Metropolitan courts during the same period. Then, in 1831, while living at 18 Bentinck Street, in a house that has since been rebuilt, he qualified as a Parliamentary reporter, and started on the career that was to furnish so much of the material for his books. From now on it was all success for him.

The five years from 1822 to 1827 were the most vital in his life. The clue to what some recent biographers and commentators have been disposed to look for in the circumstances of his marriage and overweening pride are here. Too much has been made of the blacking factory phase—following in the steps of Dickens, who himself made too much of it. A happier boy would have taken it in his stride. The root of the trouble was undoubtedly the loss of security in his parents and his home. No one who has had to deal with such problems in young people could have any doubt about this. The blacking factory was his scapegoat. The anger and bitterness he might with so much more reason have turned on his father he turned first on his job, and secondly on his mother for forcing him into it. Whatever happened, his father, although no longer the hero he had been, must not be disowned or scorned. He was too much a part of himself, too essential to his own development and eventual maturity. And can anyone who admires the son fail to have a soft spot for the father? Charles saw what havoc his father's weakness had wrought, and put up so strong a guard against it in himself, that he is sometimes accused of being a hard-bitten miser. He was, of course, nothing of the sort. He enjoyed spending money and doing things on the grand scale as much as his father did; but he knew also how

many shillings went to the pound, and by turning that knowledge to good account he was able to divert into creative and constructive channels all those inherited talents and energies which were a mockery in his father. Few men of genius can have owed more to nature and less to nurture than Charles Dickens. When John Dickens was suddenly asked, 'Pray, Mr. Dickens, where was your son educated?' he replied: 'Why, indeed, sir—ha! ha!—he may be said to have educated himself!' For once he did himself an injustice. He might have said: 'Why, sir, I suppose he must have caught the knack of it from me!'

It would be idle to speculate on the difference that a formal education would have made to Dickens. But of this we may be sure, no amount of schooling would have increased one iota the zest for life, insatiable curiosity, unquenchable humour, sympathy and boisterous geniality which he inherited in such unbounded measure from his ne'er-do-well father.

CHAPTER IV

LONDON: THE MAGIC LANTERN

A GENTLEMAN who had shared an office with Dickens at Ellis and Blackmore's said: 'I thought I knew something of Town, but after a talk with Dickens I found that I knew nothing. He knew it all from Bow to Brentford.' It was true. London, not Rochester, is the heart of Dickensland. It is by no means certain that he loved London, or even its river, as he loved Kent; but no other place—not even Gad's Hill—ever mattered to him half so much. In most of his novels—perhaps all—the principal characters reach London sooner or later. Who could have foreseen that Mr. Peggotty, so perfectly located at Yarmouth, would be found on the steps of St. Martin-in-the-Fields? Yet to Dickens there was nothing surprising in this. All roads led to London in his world, and at the centre of London was Charing Cross, or, as Dickens himself would have said, the Golden Cross Hotel, which stood at the junction of St. Martin's Lane and Cockspur Street, where the Nelson Column stands now, facing the back of King Charles's statue. And what more suitable than an ancient posting-house for the heart of Dickensian London?

The Golden Cross Hotel was the principal inn of the West End in Dickens's day. It had already changed its appearance more than once. The building he knew as a boy at Warren's Blacking Factory was a Gothic affair demolished in 1829 when the Trafalgar Square end of the Strand was replanned. When the house was bought by the Government, and pulled down to make way for these improvements, the business was transferred to a site between St. Martin's Church and the Strand. But it was the old inn that Dickens remembered so warmly. The stable yard would be where the National Gallery stands now, with a side entrance

opposite St. Martin's, so when David Copperfield saw on the steps before it, 'the stooping figure of a man, who had put down some burden on the smooth snow, to adjust it', and a moment later found himself face to face with Mr. Peggotty, the friendly hostelry was at hand for them. David invited his friend across, and, as they sat together in one of the public rooms that opened off the yard, he heard the story of Mr. Peggotty's fruitless journey in search of Little Emily.

To reach his lodgings David would go from the Golden Cross by way of Hungerford Market to 15 Buckingham Street, where Dickens himself had rooms on the top floor, and where his landlady was the original of Mrs. Crupp, 'a stout lady with a flounce of flannel petticoat beneath a nankeen gown'. It was here that Mr. and Mrs. Micawber came to dine with David on a leg of mutton that had inadvertently been dropped into the ashes of the grate. Tommy Traddles was also present on that hospitable occasion.

The coming and going of the coaches would be one of the principal entertainments in Dickens's London, and all the important posting-houses are mentioned in one or other of the novels. The Saracen's Head, where Squeers collected his victims, which was demolished in 1868 when Holborn Viaduct was constructed, was on the north side of Snow Hill, three doors away from St. Sepulchre's Church. La Belle Sauvage, Tony Weller's headquarters, stood under the railway arch in Ludgate Hill. These were for coaches going north or east, and no less famous were their first stopping places, such as the Angel at Islington—the first stage on the journey that carried Nicholas to his Yorkshire school, and for incoming travellers like John Browdie the place where London began in earnest—or the Bull at Whitechapel, familiar to East Anglians entering London, the place where the Pickwickians set out for Ipswich. For west-bound travellers the most important house was the White Horse Cellar, which stood near the corner of Dover Street until it was replaced by another house of the same

name in 1884. In Mr. Pickwick's day it was on the opposite side of the way, at the corner of Arlington Street. It was here that Sam Weller discovered that the Bath coach was owned by a Moses Pickwick, which seemed to him particularly insulting to his esteemed master. Its travellers' room, as Mr. Pickwick discovered when he arrived too early, was 'the last resort of human dejection'.

'The travellers' room at the White Horse Cellar is of course uncomfortable; it would be no travellers' room if it were not. It is the right-hand parlour, into which an aspiring kitchen fire-place appears to have walked, accompanied by a rebellious poker, tongs, and shovel. It is divided into boxes, for the solitary confinement of travellers, and is furnished with a clock, a looking-glass, and a live waiter: which latter article is kept in a small kennel for washing glasses, in a corner of the apartment.' For those who came in from the south, or went out that way, there was, of course, the White Hart, the scene of the most auspicious encounter in the entire range of Dickensian society, the meeting of Mr. Pickwick with the jocular man 'busily employed in brushing the dirt off a pair of boots', who turned out to be the incomparable Sam Weller. The George, which is the glory of the Borough today, is mentioned only once in Dickens, and that in *Little Dorrit*, not *Pickwick*; but it represents the half-dozen or so hostelries still standing in Dickens's time, and described by him as 'Great, rambling, queer, old places with galleries, and passages, and staircases, wide enough and antiquated enough to furnish material for a hundred ghost stories, supposing we should ever be reduced to the lamentable necessity of inventing any, and that the world should exist long enough to exhaust the innumerable veracious legends connected with old London Bridge, and its adjacent neighbourhood on the Surrey Side'.

Of Dickensian inns that served the people of London themselves we still have the Cheshire Cheese, reached from Fleet Street by way of Wine Office Court. In the fourth chapter of *A Tale of Two Cities*—that is to say, after the trial—Sydney Carton takes Charles Darnay 'down Ludgate-

hill to Fleet-street, and so up a covered way into a tavern'. Who can doubt that it was at the Cheshire Cheese, little altered since that fateful day, that Darnay 'recruited his strength with a good plain dinner and good wine'?

The smallness of London when Dickens began to write is shown in his descriptions of coach journeys in and out of it. 'London is so small,' says a character in *The Uncommercial Traveller*, 'if you go west you come to Hounslow.' And such was the remoteness of Hounslow from London that in *Great Expectations* we learn that the woman murdered by Estella's mother was 'found dead in a barn near Hounslow Heath'. Again, Martin Chuzzlewit got a lift from Wiltshire with a driver whose 'spruce appearance was sufficiently explained by his connection with a large stage-coaching establishment at Hounslow, whither he was conveying his load from a farm belonging to the concern in Wiltshire'.

The romance that for Dickens was inherent in London's inns, particularly its coaching inns, did not extend to every aspect of the London Scene. In spite of the hold the capital had on his imagination, as I said a moment ago, there is no evidence that he loved it. On the contrary, there were times when he hated it, and more when he feared it. Certainly in its darker and more sinister aspects he fought it all his life. But whatever his attitude, he knew it from end to end. There was not a street or square, not a court or alley, through which he might not be seen in his great slouch hat at any time of day or night, striding along, as though brain and body were impelled together, registering everything while apparently looking at nothing. But he had no illusions about what he saw. There might be glamour about the parts; there was no glamour about London as a whole for Dickens. We might even say he was ashamed of it. Writing to his wife on 7 February, 1856, he said: 'The streets are hideous to behold, and the ugliness of London is quite astonishing.' In a similar strain he writes in *The Uncommercial Traveller*: 'London is shabby in contrast with Edinburgh, with Aberdeen, with Exeter, with Liverpool, with a bright little town

like Bury St. Edmunds. London is shabby in contrast with New York, with Boston, with Philadelphia. In detail, one would say it can rarely fail to be a disappointing piece of shabbiness to a stranger from any of those places. There is nothing shabbier than Drury Lane, in Rome itself. . . . The mass of London people are shabby.' And where it was not actually shabby it was drab. In *Little Dorrit* Clennam and Meagles 'dived in among the great streets of melancholy stateliness, and the little streets that try to be stately and succeed in being more melancholy, of which there is a labyrinth near Park Lane'.

The London scene in general had in fact become drab in Dickens's time. In the eighteenth century London had been spacious and dignified, its squares and terraces trim and elegant. Each morning its church bells had called the gentlefolk to matins. But these fashionable Georgian congregations had dwindled until they were mere survivals—the kind of survivals that always intrigued Dickens. After attending such a service he wrote: 'I doubt if we were a dozen; and we had no exhausted charity school to help us out.' Such congregations, it seems, were largely drawn at this time from residents in the various charity foundations dotted about London—almshouses and endowed schools principally—together with the elderly caretakers and housekeepers who continued to live in the old London, preserving the memory of a life that had slowly receded from the tall hollow houses they guarded—cold and ghostly houses, with their massive mahogany furniture kept sheeted most of the time. It seemed, thought Dickens, as he sat in that particular church and listened to the monotonous drone of the preacher, that he 'lived in expectation of the time when the citizens would come back to live in the City', believing that 'the wanderers would first appear in the deserted churches, penitent and humbled'. In each of these churches, he said, he could sense the character of the neighbourhood—'a whiff of wheat' in Mark Lane, 'a subtle scent of wine, sometimes of tea', from Rood Lane to Tower Street, and 'behind the Monument the service had a flavour of damaged oranges'.

With his unique gift for hitting off the character of a district in a few vivid phrases he labels them all, and how often, in leaving a London street to enter one of these churches for a few moments respite from the bustle of a London street, have I personally thought of his description of a 'mouldy Christopher Wren church, with its dearly beloved brethren assembled and met together, five and twenty strong'!

The people who formerly frequented these churches now spent more of their time in the country, although the families who were not decayed still had their London houses. These, however, were now situated in the West End, and the city, where they had lived in other generations, was being surrendered to merchants, bankers, and the ever-increasing industrial population. To Dickens the new London extending from Mayfair westwards was a dreary waste. Colour and movement always appealed to him; stateliness, and, still more, pomposity, except when ridiculous merely depressed him. He had no use for such parts as Eaton Square, for example, which was being laid out while he was a young and bustling man-about-town. In *Sketches by Boz* we are told that it was 'then just building'. Belgrave Square would be slightly earlier; but it belongs roughly to the same period, and the only people Dickens placed in them in his novels were such social parvenus as the Veneerings, who lived in 'a bran new house in a bran new quarter of London'. For a mews at the rear of such places he had only derision. Mr. Tite Barnacle, it will be recalled, lived in Mews Street, Grosvenor Square—'not absolutely Grosvenor Square itself, but it was very near it. It was a hideous little street of dead wall, stables, and dunghills, with lofts over coach houses inhabited by coachmen's families. . . . Yet there were two or three small airless houses at the entrance end of Mews Street, which went at enormous rents on account of their being abject hangers-on to a fashionable situation.' Far more attractive to Dickens were the new suburbs, inhabited by such families as the Garlands, who lived at Finchley, in 'a beautiful little cottage with a thatched roof and little spires at the gable-ends, and pieces

of stained glass in some of the windows, as large as pocket books. On one side of the house was a little stable, just the size for the pony, with a little room over it, just the size for Kit.'

These suburbs were then within easy reach of the city. Such places as Finchley, for example, still retained their rural character, and it was customary for those who worked in the shadow of St. Paul's to walk home in the evening to their neat little villas in either north or east London. Nicholas Nickleby and his mother had a cottage at Bow, and in *Sketches by Boz* we read about 'the regular City man, who leaves Lloyd's at five o'clock and drives home to Hackney, Clapton, Stamford Hill or elsewhere'. Others were said to live on the Hampstead or Kilburn roads. Most of Dickens's more respectable characters lived in what is now north London, and were to be met with each evening on their way home to their rather self-conscious looking residences north of City Road and Pentonville Road. 'The early clerk population of Somers and Camden Towns, Islington, and Pentonville,' we read in one place, 'are fast pouring into the city, or directing their steps towards Chancery Lane and the Inns of Court.' He tells us that in fine weather these 'Islington clerks, with large families and small salaries, left off their black gaiters, disdained to carry their once green cotton umbrellas, and walked to town in the conscious pride of white stockings and cleanly brushed Bluchers'.

Although in many respects so different from our London, the general effect of this rapid expansion which followed the Georgian era must have been similar to that of the post-war years of the present century.

But the real London of Dickens was the old London. And what a gift he had for describing it! Take his description of Smithfield: 'The ground was covered, nearly ankle-deep, with filth and mire; a thick steam, perpetually rising from the reeking bodies of the cattle, and mingling with the fog, which seemed to rest upon the chimney-pots, hung heavily above. All the pens in the centre of the large area, and as many temporary pens as could be crowded into the

vacant space, were filled with sheep; tied up to posts by the gutter-side were long lines of beasts and oxen, three or four deep. Countrymen, butchers, drovers, hawkers, boys, thieves, idlers, and vagabonds of every low grade, were mingled together in a dense mass. The whistling of drovers, the barking of dogs, the bellowing and plunging of oxen, the bleating of sheep, the grunting and squeaking of pigs; the cries of hawkers, the shouts, oaths, and quarrelling on all sides; the ringing of bells and the roar of voices that issued from every public-house; the crowding, pushing, driving, beating, whooping, and yelling; the hideous and discordant din that resounded from every corner of the market; and the unwashed, unshaven, squalid, and dirty figures constantly running to and fro, and bursting in and out of the throng, rendered it a stunning and bewildering scene, which quite confounded the senses.'

To the very heart of his being Dickens was a London writer. Yet he was not particularly interested in his own succession of London homes. Forster says that 'any special regard for houses he had lived in was not a thing noticeable in him'. For this very reason, incidentally, there is no point in following him here from one to another of them. Most of them were typical middle-class houses of the period, and of no particular merit apart from their association with his work. The Doughty Street house, however, in which he lived from March 1837 to the end of 1839, is of special interest because in the nineteen-twenties it was bought by members of the Dickens Fellowship and is now the Dickens Museum. Probably the one home in which he did relax and enjoy a measure of happiness with his family was that in Devonshire Terrace, York Gate, which although much altered is still standing near the northern end of Marylebone High Street, with a tablet recording that Dickens lived in it from the end of 1839 to 1851—a long time for so restless a man to remain in one house. He did, in fact, leave it for a short time in 1844 to live at 9 Osnaburgh Terrace. The last ten years of his life were spent in Tavistock Square.

But if his London homes mattered little to him, the

streets about them were life itself. His first published work was simply a succession of London scenes in which, even if the book as a whole gives little indication of the eventual power of his genius, contains ample evidence both of his keen insight into local character and of his astonishing knowledge of every kind of London institution from Scotland Yard to Greenwich Fair.

In spite of this, the London of Dickens is highly personal. It is not the scholar's London. He has practically nothing to say about its great historic buildings. All we can discover about his personal feeling for St. Paul's is that he found its bells a nuisance and would have had them stopped if he could. Westminster Abbey never fired his imagination. He certainly did not aspire to be buried there, as in fact he was. Indeed he expressly states in his will: 'I emphatically direct that I be buried in an inexpensive, unostentatious and strictly private manner.' In view of all that has been written recently about his pride and vanity, that solemn direction is worth noting. Nor was he interested in the London frequented by the eminent of his own day—Pall Mall, Piccadilly, Regent Street, none of which get more than passing references. 'Mr. Bailey, Junior, just tall enough to be seen by an enquiring eye, gazing indolently at society from beneath the apron of his master's cab, drove slowly up and down Pall Mall, about the hour of noon, in waiting for his "Governor".'¹

Piccadilly was chiefly remarkable to Dickens for the White Horse Cellar. None of the other references to it amount to much. Of the rest of this fashionable quarter little or nothing is said. The entire region belongs to Thackeray rather than Dickens. 'Indeed,' he says, 'the mansions and their inhabitants were so much alike . . . that the people were often to be found drawn up on opposite sides of dinner-tables, in the shade of their own loftiness, staring at the other side of the way with the dullness of the houses. Everybody knows how like the street the two dinner-rows of people who take their stand by the street will be. The

¹ *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Chapter XXVII.

expressionless uniform twenty houses, all to be knocked up and rung at in the same form, all approachable by the same dull steps, all fended off by the same pattern of railing, all with the same impracticable fire-escapes, the same inconvenient fixtures in their heads, and everything, without exception, to be taken at a high valuation—who has not dined with these?’

The great London thoroughfare that Dickens did know intimately—and he knew every inch of it—was that of the Strand and Fleet Street. Here, as nowhere else, he experienced a sense of history as well as the contemporary surge of humanity. The Strand is no longer the highway Dickens knew in his boyhood adventures from Warren’s Blacking Factory, when he would go out to see the lion over the gateway of Northumberland House. The Law Courts occupy part of the site of Clare Market; the slums of the Drury Lane neighbourhood have gone. But no Dickensian can forget its score of associations as he threads his way through its crowds. David Copperfield knew the Strand. Ralph Nickleby ‘made the best of his way to the Strand’, when he visited Miss La Creevy, ‘and stopped at a private door about half-way down the crowded thoroughfare. A miniature painter lived there, for there was a large gilt frame screwed upon the street door.’ *Pickwick Papers*, *David Copperfield*, *Little Dorrit*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Uncommercial Traveller*, *Bleak House*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and doubtless others, have references to the Strand. Mr. Haredale, it will be recalled, ‘walked along the Strand’ after the burning of the Warren by the Gordon rioters; Martin Chuzzlewit, after he had found lodging for Mark and himself ‘in a court in the Strand not far from Temple Bar . . . passed more Golden Balls than all the jugglers in Europe have juggled with, in the course of their united performances, before he could determine in favour of any particular shop where those symbols were displayed’. The shop, we may be sure, was in the Strand. As for the sense of history, it was here that he set the vivid scene in *A Tale of*

Two Cities, following the mobbing of the house of a spy at Temple Bar.

All the region between the Strand with Fleet Street and Holborn, the other great Dickensian thoroughfare—the place where he took his children to do their Christmas shopping—is home ground to Dickens. Covent Garden could always inspire him, so that we find in his works:

‘Courtly ideas of Covent Garden, as a place with famous coffee-houses, where gentlemen wearing gold-laced coats and swords had quarrelled and fought duels; costly ideas of Covent Garden, as a place where there were flowers in winter at guineas a-piece, pineapples at guineas a pound, and peas at guineas a pint; picturesque ideas of Covent Garden, as a place where there was a mighty theatre, showing wonderful and beautiful sights to richly-dressed ladies and gentlemen, and which was for ever beyond the reach of poor Fanny or poor uncle; desolate ideas of Covent Garden, as having all those arches in it, where the miserable children in rags among whom she has just now passed, like young rats, slunk and hid, fed on offal, huddled together for warmth, and were hunted about; teeming ideas of Covent Garden, as a place of past and present mystery, romance, abundance, want, beauty, ugliness, fair country gardens, and foul street-gutters, all confused together.’ Yes, every aspect of London life could be centred in Covent Garden—even the legal, his greatest London preoccupation. But the prevailing conception was the actual scene as he saw it day after day and night after night:

‘This market of Covent Garden was quite out of the creature’s line of road, but it had the attraction for him which it has for the worst of the solitary members of the drunken tribe. It may be the companionship of the nightly stir, or it may be the companionship of the gin and beer that slop about among carpenters and hucksters, or it may be the companionship of the trodden vegetable refuse, which is so like their own dress that perhaps they take the Market for a great wardrobe; but be it what it may, you shall see no such individual drunkards anywhere, as there. Of dozing

women-drunkards especially, you shall come upon such specimens there, in the morning sunlight, as you might seek out of doors in vain through London. Such stale vapid rejected cabbage-leaf and cabbage-stalk dress, such damaged-orange countenance, such squashed pulp of humanity, are open to the day nowhere else. So the attraction of the Market drew Mr. Dolls to it, and he had out his two fits of trembles and horrors in a doorway on which a woman had had out her sodden nap a few hours before.'

These places belonged to the London of the Blacking Factory days, to the time when his oversharpened brain was so abnormally sensitive to everything. Something of the mood of his first years in London was to shadow everything he wrote later. We are spared nothing of the sordidness of the pauper's London, nothing of the heartlessness of its wealth and the grind and misery of its poverty. Emotional effects are heightened to a degree that would be unbearable if it were not for the comic relief he invariably contrives to bring in. Think, for example, of his gruesome burial-grounds—the one in *Bleak House* for example, where poor Nemo is buried. It was 'pestiferous and obscene', communicating malignant diseases from the dead to the living. All round it were houses, 'save where a reeking little tunnel of a court gives access to the iron gate—with every villainy of life in action close on death, and every poisonous element of death in action close on life—here, they lower our dear brother down a foot or two; here sow him in corruption, to be raised in corruption'. As Joe conducted Lady Dedlock round this dreadful place he pointed to the spot: 'Over yinder. Among them piles of bones, and close to that there kitchen winder!' and added: 'They put him wery nigh the top. They was obliged to stamp upon it to git it in. I could unkiver it for you with my broom, if the gate was open. That's why they locks it, I s'pose. It's always locked. Look at the rat! Hi! Look! There he goes! Ho! Into the ground.' We are spared nothing, and equally Dickens spared himself nothing. This obsession with horrors possessed him to the end, and it is by no means unlikely that it was to placate

his conscience for this preoccupation with the macabre that he acquired such a zeal for reform.

Nevertheless there was no question about these places being a public scandal in the eighteen-thirties and forties, or about Dicken's part in having them closed. It is on record that between 1823 and 1842 more than twelve thousand bodies were buried in a vault sixty feet wide and six and a half feet deep in the sepulchre at Enon Chapel in Clare Market. These burials in city graveyards ceased in 1852, the year in which *Bleak House* began to appear in serial form.

The most dreary spot in the London of Dickens was Tom-All-Alone's, which was somewhere in the neighbourhood of Clare Market and Drury Lane—'a black dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people, where the crazy houses were seized upon, when their decay was far advanced, by some bold vagrants, who, after establishing their own possessions, took to letting them out in lodgings. Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so, these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in.' It was to this unwholesome quarter that Mr. Snagsby, the law-stationer, was conducted by Inspector Bucket and a constable through streets that reeked with such smells, and offended with such sights, that although a Londoner born and bred he could hardly believe his senses.

The other side of the sordid picture is painted in the lurid colours of the gin palaces, which were 'invariably numerous and splendid in precise proportion to the dirt and poverty of the surrounding neighbourhood'. The most garishly magnificent were in and about Drury Lane, Holborn, St. Giles's, Covent Garden, and Clare Market, the most squalid and filthy parts of London in the eighteen-thirties and -forties. In *Sketches by Boz* we are conducted through tortuous streets and dirty courts from Oxford Street to

Drury Lane until we arrive at the Rookery at the bottom of Tottenham Court Road, of which he says:

'The filthy and miserable appearance of this part of London can hardly be imagined by those (and there are many such) who have not witnessed it. Wretched houses with broken windows patched with rags and paper, every room let out to a different family and in many instances to two or even three; fruit and "sweet-stuff" manufacturers in the cellars, barbers and red-herring vendors in the front parlours, and cobblers in the back; a bird-fancier on the first floor, three families on the second, starvation in the attics, Irishmen in the passage, a "musician" in the front kitchen, and a charwoman and five hungry children in the back one—filth everywhere—a gutter before the houses and a drain behind them—clothes drying and slops emptying from the windows: girls of fourteen or fifteen, with matted hair, walking about barefooted, and in white great-coats, almost their only covering; boys of all ages, in coats of all sizes and no coats at all; men and women, in every variety of scanty and dirty apparel, lounging, scolding, drinking, smoking, squabbling, fighting, and swearing.

'You turn the corner. What a change! All is light and brilliancy. The hum of many voices issues from that splendid gin-shop which forms the commencement of the two streets opposite, and the gay building with the fantastically ornamented parapet, the illuminated clock, the plate-glass windows surrounded by stucco-rosettes, and its profusion of gas-lights in richly-gilt burners, is perfectly dazzling when contrasted with the darkness and dirt we have just left. The interior is even gayer than the exterior. A bar of French-polished mahogany, elegantly carved, extends the whole width of the place; and there are two side-aisles of great casks, painted green and gold, enclosed within a light brass rail, and bearing such inscriptions as "Old Tom, 549"; "Young Tom, 360"; "Samson, 1421". Beyond the bar is a lofty and spacious saloon, full of the same enticing vessels, with a gallery running round it, equally well furnished.'

The furnishings of buildings always fascinated Dickens,

and during his lifetime, as again during ours, the appearance of London was radically altered in this respect. The difference so far as the shops were concerned, was that where in our generation the change has been from brick or stone frontages with wooden window frames to huge sheets of plate glass in steel-framed buildings, held in position by chromium fittings, in his the fittings were gilt and the principal furnishings mahogany. Plate glass, however, did come into vogue in Dickens's time, although no one then realized how large and brilliantly lighted the shop windows of the next generation would be. What a time Dickens would have if he were alive today! We can imagine him, shall we say, as a special reporter for a popular daily newspaper, or a B.B.C. commentator during the fortnight before Christmas. Oxford Street would hold him entranced. And if his life could have been prolonged from his own day to ours, what a time he would have had recalling how the epidemic for brighter premises broke out among the linen-draper and haberdashers towards the end of the eighteen-twenties, how 'quiet dusty old shops in different parts of town were pulled down; spacious premises with stuccoed fronts and gold letters, were erected instead; floors were covered with turkey carpets; roofs supported by massive pillars; doors knocked into windows, a dozen squares of glass into one, one shopman into a dozen. . . . The disease abated. It died away; and a year or two of comparative tranquillity ensued. Suddenly it burst out again among the chemists; the symptoms were the same, with the addition of a strong desire to stick the royal arms over the shop-door, and a great rage for mahogany, varnish, and expensive floor-cloth.' Those who believe that Dickensian London was quiet, settled, and more leisurely than our own supposedly confused and rowdy age have only to read Dickens himself to be cured of the delusion.

Dickens's personal reactions to this rapidly changing scene were mixed. The clue to them is that sympathy for the oppressed, which however it was roused—and much of it had its roots in the arid soil of his boyhood—was real enough. There was neither wistfulness nor antiquarianism

about his love of ancient institutions. He loved them only when they were genial and abounding in humanity. The transformation of the London streets, the abolition of slums and the growing wealth of the city, he welcomed; but he could never forget the people. He knew that much of the progress was service to Mammon, and as such condemned it. 'Thus,' he wrote, 'we make our New Oxford Streets, and our other new streets, never heeding, never asking, where the wretches whom we clear out, crowd.' And to Dickens the most heartless of the forces of his particular anti-Christ was the legal profession. The merchants might live to make money. They might be building their fine houses outside the City, and driving in gigs and carriage-and-pairs to the offices over which they had hitherto lived; but there were Cheerybles among them as well as Scrooges. And if not openly philanthropic, they were at least human and subject to human misfortunes—like the Dombey and Clennams. Not so most of the lawyers, whose hand was the dead hand of outworn procedure.

In the forties and fifties of the century—at the time, that is to say, when Dickens was writing so many novels with plots turning on the restriction of the law—legal administration in England was so full of archaic survivals that it had become a public scandal. It is only fair to add that before the end of his life reforms were taking effect. Everyone knew of the scandal and the need for reform; but the workings of the law were as mysterious as the workings of Providence, and quite as inscrutable. The marvel is that from a short period spent partly in an attorney's office and partly as a reporter of law cases when he was a young and indifferently educated youth, Dickens should have gained so intimate a knowledge of a system that even today baffles the most erudite. He was only fifteen when he went into the office of Charles Molloy, attorney, of 6 Symond's Inn, moving from there to Ellis and Blackmore, attorneys, of 1 Raymond Buildings, Gray's Inn—or vice versa, as some think. He was only eighteen when he picked up such a mass of material while a reporter

in Lord Chancellor Lyndhurst's Court in Doctors' Commons. The pictures drawn in his works of life in the London courts at the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign has no equal in either Victorian literature or that of any other age. It is true that he makes mistakes, particularly with regard to the ownership of property. J. M. Gest in *The Lawyer in Literature*, and William S. Holdsworth in *Dickens as a Legal Historian* have pointed out that as Daniel Quilp, the hideous dwarf in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, committed suicide, his property under the law of that time, being that of a felon, would have reverted to the Crown. Also that unless she had a settlement, which is unlikely, Mrs. Weller's property would have come to Tony on marriage. For all that, time after time he makes sport of the law in a way that shows that he knew perfectly well what he was talking about. For example, he makes Bumble remark very sensibly of the presumption that if a wife commits a crime in the presence of her husband she does it under coercion, 'if the law supposes that, the law is an ass'. Mind you, he had friends in the legal profession, and some of them eminent. Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd, friend of Lamb, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, Justice of the Court of Common Pleas, was one of his closest friends. Talfourd, then a serjeant, revised the trial scene in *Pickwick* for him. It was Talfourd who, while Member of Parliament for Reading, introduced the Custody of Infants Bill and the Copyright Bill.

The case of *Bardell v. Pickwick*, it will be remembered, was begun in the Court of Common Pleas, from which it was adjourned to the Guildhall by right of an Act of 1823, which permitted hearings to be continued after the end of term at Serjeant's Inn, or at 'some other convenient place'. In his description of the scene at the Guildhall Dickens was at the top of his bent:

"Lowten," said Perker, when they reached the outer hall of the court, "put Mr. Pickwick's friends in the students' box, Mr. Pickwick himself had better sit by me. This way, my dear sir, this way." Taking Mr. Pickwick by the coat-sleeve, the little man led him to the low seat just beneath

the desks of the King's Counsel, which is constructed for the convenience of attorneys, who from that spot can whisper into the ear of the leading counsel in the case any instructions that may be necessary during the progress of the trial. The occupants of this seat are invisible to the great body of spectators, inasmuch as they sit on a much lower level than either the barristers or the audience, whose seats are raised above the floor. Of course they have their backs to both, and their faces towards the judge.

“That's the witness-box, I suppose?” said Mr. Pickwick, pointing to a kind of pulpit, with a brass rail, on his left hand.

“That's the witness-box, my dear sir,” replied Perker, disinterring a quantity of paper from the blue bag, which Lowten had just deposited at his feet.

“And that,” said Mr. Pickwick, pointing to a couple of enclosed seats on his right, “that's where the jurymen sit, is it not?”

“The identical place, my dear sir,” replied Perker, tapping the lid of his snuff-box.

Every detail is described with the wit and insight for which Dickens is unsurpassed in such scenes. To him the central mystery of London was legal. The city of his day was not so much a place of stockbrokers and bankers as of lawyers and their clerks. Outside London, if we had only the novels to go by, we should conclude that lawyers counted for little. Are there, in fact, any beside Wickfield and Uriah Heep? Inside London they controlled everything. And all this intimate and precise knowledge was gained during those few years in youth, most notably, perhaps, while he occupied chambers in Furnival's Inn, where the first chapters of *Pickwick Papers* were written. In fact, when he was twenty-seven he actually entered his name as a student of Middle Temple, but he was never 'called', and did not have the pleasure of dining there until many years later. It was in Fountain Court that John Westlock courted Ruth Pinch, and the Inner Temple Gate is the scene of more than one exciting turn in the novels. Here

Bradley Headstone watched the movements of Eugene Wrayburn, as we learn in the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh chapters of *Our Mutual Friend*, where Eugene tells Mortimer Lightwood how, consumed with jealousy and hatred, Bradley Headstone lurked in dark doorways to catch Eugene coming through the gate, then followed him to see whether he was going to meet Lizzie Hexam.

Legal survivals had particular interest for Dickens. His first acquaintance with this other world, as it seemed, was through Doctors' Commons, situated in St. Bennet's Hill, St. Paul's Churchyard, which had five courts: the Court of Arches, the Prerogative Court, the Consistory Court of the Bishop of London, the Court of Faculties, and the High Court of the Admiralty. They were merged in the new Probate Court in 1857, and their business is now carried on partly at the Law Courts and partly at Somerset House. Doctors' Commons was finally dissolved in 1861. The actual buildings were demolished six years later. Dickens tells us what Doctors' Commons represented in his day in the twenty-third chapter of *David Copperfield*, where David asks Steerforth what a proctor is and receives the reply:

'Why, he is a sort of monkish attorney . . . I can tell you best what he is by telling you what Doctors' Commons is. It's a little out-of-the-way place, where they administer what is called ecclesiastical law, and play all kinds of tricks with obsolete old monsters of Acts of Parliament, which three-fourths of the world know nothing about, and the other fourth supposes to have been dug up, in a fossil state, in the days of the Edwards. It's a place that has an ancient monopoly in suits about people's wills and people's marriages, and disputes among ships and boats.'

Inns of Court and Inns of Chancery appear and reappear throughout the novels, and although so much alike to the layman, each takes its own particular character from his quick observation and pawky humour. Symond's Inn, which Dickens got to know well while a clerk in the office of Charles Molloy, was 'a little, pale, wall-eyed, woe-begone inn, like a large dust-bin of two compartments and a sifter.

It looks as if Symond were a sparing man in his way, and constructed his inn of old building materials, which took kindly to the dry rot and to dirt, and all things decaying and dismal, and perpetuated Symond's name with congenial shabbiness.' So we read in *Bleak House*, which has that evocative description of Lincoln's Inn:

'It is night in Lincoln's Inn—perplexed and troublous valley of the shadow of the law, where suitors generally find but little day—and fat candles are snuffed out in offices, and clerks have rattled down the crazy wooden stairs, and dispersed. The bell that rings at nine o'clock, has ceased its doleful clangour about nothing; the gates are shut; and the night-porter, a solemn warder with a mighty power of sleep, keeps guard in his lodge. From tiers of staircase windows, clogged lamps like the eyes of Equity, bleared Argus with a fathomless pocket for every eye and an eye upon it, dimly blink at the stars. In dirty upper casements, here and there, hazy little patches of candlelight reveal where some wise draughtsman and conveyancer yet toils for the entanglement of real estate in meshes of sheep-skin, in the average ratio of about a dozen of sheep to an acre of land.' That is in Chapter XXXII. In the first chapter of *Bleak House*, one of the best first chapters in Dickens, an actual fog is introduced as an allegory of the fog of legal procedure.

In *Great Expectations* Barnard's Inn is introduced more genially—at least in the fancy of Pip, who had thought it to be an hotel kept by a Mr. Barnard, whereas it turned out to be no more heart-warming than the rest. It was, in fact, 'the dingiest collection of shabby buildings ever squeezed together in a rank corner as a club for tom-cats'.

When we come to lawyers' offices we find they are almost as numerous as hostelries in the novels, the one, it might be thought, providing the shadows to throw up the lights of the other. There were Serjeant Snubbin's chambers in the twenty-first chapter of *Pickwick*, Tulkinghorn's in Lincoln's Inn Fields in the tenth chapter of *Bleak House*, Kenge and Carboy's, also in Lincoln's Inn Fields, in the third chapter

of *Pickwick*, Spenlow and Jorkin's in Doctors' Commons in the twenty-third chapter of *David Copperfield*, and Mr. Jagger's in *Great Expectations*.

And while we are thinking of Lincoln's Inn Fields it is worth mentioning that Forster lived at No. 58, in a house, which, says Dickens, 'had been a house of State, but had fallen somewhat from its former grandeur, and was let off in suites of rooms'. It was in this house that Mr. Tulkinghorn, Sir Leicester Dedlock's lawyer, was found shot dead, with the Roman on the painted ceiling pointing towards him. The house still survives as a reminder of the time when Lincoln's Inn Fields was residential.

But in Dickens the legal world is not isolated from the rest of life. It is one of his great merits that however heightened his portraits and sketches may be they are never created in a vacuum or against a meaningless backcloth. Riddled as the city was with lawyers, it was still the dwelling place of such characters as Wilkins Micawber and Mr. Casby, of whom we read in *Little Dorrit* that he 'lived in a street in Gray's Inn Road, which had set off from that thoroughfare with the intention of running at one heat down into the valley and up again to the top of Pentonville Hill: but which had run itself out of breath in twenty yards, and had stood still ever since. There is no such place in that part now.' And while the law is being learned under the eye of Mr. Spenlow, the outside world is kept well in view. During visits to the lawyer's home at Norwood, David fell in love with Dora, and afterwards haunted the neighbourhood in the hope of catching a glimpse of her.

To recount what this part of London meant to Dickens we should have to go through the novels one by one and track down scores of references. Many ardent Dickensians have done this in order to have the immortal associations in mind as they walk through the streets in the course of their prosaic everyday duties. In Chancery Lane, for example, we may think of Mr. Pickwick on his way to the Fleet, or recall that John Rokesmith first met Mr. Boffin there. It was at a coffee house in Chancery Lane that old

Tom Jarndyce blew his brains out. Mr. Snagsby lived and carried on his business as a law stationer in Took's Court, 'Cook's Court' of *Bleak House*, and received visits from Mr. Chadband, 'a large yellow man with a fat smile, and a general appearance of having a good deal of train oil in his composition'. Here Mrs. Snagsby was 'the high standard of comparison among the neighbouring wives a long way down Chancery Lane on both sides', while in the neighbourhood of Symond's Inn, Mr. Snagsby loved 'to lounge about of a Saturday afternoon, and to remark (if in good spirits) that there were old times once'.

It was in such places as these that Dickens acquired his affection for the old and picturesque. That the contrast between the bustle outside the courts and the quietness within them appealed to Dickens's dramatic sense is shown repeatedly. In Chapter Three of *Bleak House* Esther Summer-son says, 'we drove through the dirtiest and darkest streets that ever were seen in the world, and in such a distracting state of confusion that I wondered how the people kept their senses, until we passed into sudden quietude under an old gateway, and drove on through a silent square until we came to an odd nook in a corner where there was an entrance up a steep, broad flight of stairs, like an entrance to a church'. The place in question was where Mr. Kenge, of Kenge and Carboy, had his office.

One of the problems confronting those who try to see through the complex mind of Charles Dickens is this romantic attachment to the past in one so Radical—one who in most things was so slap up-to-date in his attitude to life. The most likely explanation, I suppose, is that his restless spirit found repose in these quiet courts, fiercely as he protested against what went on in them. Nowhere, for example, is he more nostalgic and subdued in his writings than where he writes of the Temple in *Barnaby Rudge*, commending it as a place 'for basking in the sun or resting idly in the shade. There is yet a drowsiness in its courts,' he says, 'and a dreamy dullness in its trees and gardens. Those who pace its lanes and squares may yet hear the echoes of their footsteps on

the sounding stones and read upon its gates in passing from the tumult of the Strand or Fleet Street, "Who enters here leaves noise behind". . . . In summer time, its pumps suggest to thirsty idlers springs cooler and more sparkling and deeper than other wells . . . and, sighing, they cast sad looks towards the Thames and think of baths and boats, and saunter on, despondent.'

After the legal part of London, we may think of Holborn as being peculiarly Dickensian, although little is left of the Holborn he knew. The Prudential Company's offices now occupy the site of Furnival's Inn, where Mr. Pickwick was born. The School of Arts and Crafts at the junction of Southampton Row and Theobalds Road occupies the site of Kingsgate Street, where Mrs. Gamp lived over Poll Sweedlepipe's shaving establishment. The Black Bull in Holborn, where Mrs. Gamp and Betsy Prig nursed 'turn and turn about', disappeared when Gamage's premises were built about 1904, and most of the Bloomsbury they knew was demolished the following year for Kingsway to be built. But much of the scene can be reconstructed in imagination from a detailed study of the novels in conjunction with an old map. Holborn Viaduct, completed in 1869, was unknown to Dickens, and we can readily imagine a time when the hills it spans were so dangerous to coaches. With equal ease we can imagine Job Trotter, 'abating nothing of his speed', running up Holborn Hill to Mr. Perker's at Gray's Inn. In *David Copperfield* the clock of the bombed, but about to be rebuilt, St. Andrew's church, now overshadowed by the Viaduct, disclosed that David was a quarter of an hour late in screwing up his courage 'to pull the private bell-handle let into the left-hand door-post of Mr. Waterbrook's house' when he went to see Agnes. This house was in Ely Place, Holborn, a turning on the left out of Charterhouse Street. And when we come to *Oliver Twist* we find the region packed with associations. Oliver came along Saffron Hill from Clerkenwell with The Artful Dodger, and here in Saffron Hill stood The Three Cripples, the 'local' of Bill Sikes and Fagin, described as 'a low public-house situate

in the filthiest part of Little Saffron Hill; a dark and gloomy den, where a flaring gas-light burnt all day'.

With so little left of the London Dickens knew, it is odd that the one building universally associated with him, The Old Curiosity Shop in Portsmouth Street, should be spurious. The name was not given to these premises until 1868, when they were acquired by a Mr. Tesseyman, a dealer in old books, paintings, china and so forth, who adopted it for purposes of business, and found it much to his advantage to allow people to assume that this was the veritable Old Curiosity Shop of Dickens. Of genuine reminders of the period the façade of Staple Inn is the most suggestive. In Chapter XI of *Edwin Drood* it is described thus: 'Behind the most ancient part of Holborn, London, where certain gabled houses some centuries of age stand looking on the public way, as if disconsolately looking for the Old Bourne that has long run dry, is a little nook composed of two irregular quadrangles called Staple Inn. It is one of those nooks the turning into which out of the clashing streets imparts to the relieved pedestrian the sensation of having put cotton in his ears and velvet soles on his boots.'

In producing topographical atmosphere it is important to get the most significant relationship of place with time, and no one knew this better than Dickens. November is a favourite month with him for his more dramatic London scenes—November, the beginning of winter, when the murk and dark still strike the eye as strange and foreboding. Into this sombre November scene he loved to introduce such cheerful little islands of light as the 'little block-tin temples sacred to baked potatoes, surmounted by a splendid design in variegated lamps', glittering wine vaults, or spacious apartments dimly lit, 'where are seated some eighty or a hundred guests knocking little pewter measures on the tables, and hammering away, with the handles of their knives, as if they were so many trunk-makers'. These merry souls, we find, 'are applauding a glee, which has just been executed by the three "professional gentlemen" at the top of the centre table, one of whom is in the chair'. But perhaps

his best November scenes are enveloped in fog. You remember the one in Book III, Chapter I of *Our Mutual Friend*:

'It was a foggy night in London, and the fog was heavy and dark. Animate London, with smarting eyes and irritated lungs, was blinking, wheezing, and choking; inanimate London was a sooty spectre, divided in purpose between being visible and invisible, and so being wholly neither. Gaslights flared in the shops with a haggard and unblest air, as knowing themselves to be night creatures that had no business abroad under the sun; while the sun itself, when it was for a few moments dimly indicated through circling eddies of fog, showed as if it had gone out, and were collapsing flat and cold. Even in the surrounding country it was a foggy day, but there the fog was grey, whereas in London it was, at about the boundary line, dark yellow, and a little within it brown, and then browner, and then browner, until at the heart of the City—which call St. Mary Axe—it was rusty-black.'

But London in all its moods intoxicated him. It was the stimulant that kept his imagination going. In a letter to Professor Felton, dated 2 January, 1844, we learn of the 'extraordinary excitement' he experienced while writing *A Christmas Carol*. During this time he 'walked about the black streets of London fifteen and twenty miles many a night'. He was then living in Devonshire Terrace, which was close to Bayham Street, and during these nocturnal wanderings the story took shape in his mind. Without London he was mentally and spiritually lost. Of his visits to Italy in 1844 Forster says, 'He craved for the London streets'. Genoa could not move him for a moment as London did continuously. Before starting to write a new chapter, or to create a new character, he would take long walks through the streets, often by night. Without them, says Forster, he was dumbfounded. Confessing how much these nocturnal sorties meant to him, Dickens himself said: 'Put me down on Waterloo Bridge at eight o'clock in the evening, and I would come home, as you know, panting to go on. I am sadly strange as it is, and can't settle.' Two years later

we find him writing from Lausanne about this strange numbness that came over him whenever he was deprived of the London streets: 'It seems as if they supplied something to my brain which it cannot bear, when busy, to lose. . . . The toil and labour of writing day after day, without that magic lantern, is IMMENSE. . . . My figures seem to stagnate without crowds about them.'

When we consider that Dickens's personal experience of London extended over a mere forty years or so it is surprising to find how much it altered during his lifetime. The Smithfield described a moment ago had gone before he died. The construction of Holborn Viaduct and Kingsway transformed Holborn as completely as the construction of Trafalgar Square transformed the Charing Cross neighbourhood. The Fleet and the Marshalsea went. Hungerford Market was removed. Even Jacob's Island had gone before the end. If he could stride round London today as he did a hundred years ago he would be astonished at the change, and be entitled to derive satisfaction from the knowledge that his own writings had done so much to bring it about. Whether he would find the new London as fascinating as the old is a different matter. On the whole, I think he would.

CHAPTER V

LONDON RIVER

WHEN Dickens visited his godfather, Christopher Huffam, at 5 Church Row, Limehouse, he felt at home. The river that flowed past its wharves and stairs was the river he had sailed on in the Pay-Office yacht from Chatham, and that he had seen in the distance from Gad's Hill. It was the river he was to know intimately to the end of his life. Its people lived a life apart from the cosmopolitan life of the streets. They belonged to the old, the immemorial life of the port from which the City sprang, and already Dickens knew that they were a dwindling community. Scores of the old watermen were now odd-job men at posting-houses, whose only connection with water was that they carried it to thirsty horses. When the Victoria and Albert Embankments were constructed towards the end of his life, bringing the town to the water's edge, their ancient commonage was finally lost to them. When this had been accomplished traditional rights of way, and river approaches of every kind, were rigidly controlled. Landings were permitted at fixed points only, and these were illuminated and carefully watched. The enterprise was on a par with that of taking the common from the villager at the time of the enclosures, or the foreshore from the fisherfolk when an ancient seaport was turned into a fashionable watering-place.

No one knew better than Dickens that there was in fact good reason for bringing the river approaches under control. He knew that every conceivable kind of nefarious practice had found cover in the foul-smelling basements of riverside houses and the outlets of disused sewers. But with his sentimental attachment to old-time ways of life it was inevitable that he should remember the Thameside watermen with affection. In *Sketches by Boz* we have three of them

touting for custom at the end of Strand Lane, and most of the famous, and infamous, riverside stairs have associations with one or other of the novels. Pip, as we shall recall presently, had his boat at Temple Stairs ready for the attempt to smuggle Magwitch out of the country. From the same stairs Mr. Tartar rowed Mr. Grewgious and Rosa Bud up the river. And in *Martin Chuzzlewit* Mr. Nadgett, who had been on the look-out, disclosed that Jonas Chuzzlewit had carried the clothes in which he had disguised himself for the murder of Tigg Montague, down London Bridge steps on the Middlesex bank, and after furtive glances both ways had sunk them in the river. The bundle, 'stained with clay and spotted with blood', was subsequently fished out.

Most memorable of all is the occasion in *Oliver Twist* when Nancy took Rose Maylie and Mr. Brownlow to the southern end of the bridge, where she thought she would be able to tell them her story without being seen. 'Not here,' she said, 'I'm afraid to speak to you here. Come away—out of the public road—down the steps yonder!' It was a dismal night, we are told. 'A mist hung over the river, deepening the red glare of the fires that burnt upon the small craft moored off the different wharves, and rendering darker and more indistinct the murky buildings on the banks. The old smoke-stained storehouses on either side rose heavy and dull from the dense mass of roofs and gables, and frowned sternly upon water too black to reflect even their lumbering shapes. The tower of old St. Saviour's Church [Southwark Cathedral] and the spire of St. Magnus, so long the giant-warders of the ancient bridge, were visible in the gloom, but the forest of shipping below the bridge, and the thickly scattered spires of churches above, were nearly all hidden from the sight.' As Nancy led the way to the landing stairs on the Surrey side of the river she did not know that she was being shadowed by Noah Claypole, who heard the whole story and passed it on to Fagin, with results that led to Nancy's brutal murder at the hands of Bill Sikes.

The house in which Sikes sought refuge from those who

were roused to avenge the murder was in Metcalf Yard, Jacob's Island, a place that was later converted into stables. And we know how, when tracked and brought to bay, the murderer tried to escape by lowering himself into a ditch by means of a rope attached to the chimney-stack. As he did so, he turned his head for an instant, and in his delirium saw Nancy's eyes fixed on him, whereupon, uttering an unearthly shriek, he lost his grip and fell, to be hanged by the rope he had hoped to escape by.

Jacob's Island was the most disreputable part of riverside London in those days, and Dickens's description of it has permanent value as a record of what it was like. 'Near to that part of the Thames on which the church at Rotherhithe abuts,' he says, 'where the buildings on the banks are dirtiest, and the vessels on the river blackest with the dust of colliers and the smoke of close-built low-roofed houses, there exists . . . the filthiest, the strangest, the most extraordinary of the many localities that are hidden in London, wholly unknown, even by name, to the great mass of the inhabitants.' It was surrounded by a creek or inlet from the Thames, a muddy ditch at low water, which at high water could be filled by opening the sluices at the lead mills from which its name was derived. 'At such times, a stranger, looking from one of the wooden bridges thrown across it at Mill Lane, will see the inhabitants of the houses on either side lowering from their back doors and windows buckets, pails, domestic utensils of all kinds, in which to haul the water up.' In the preface to the 1867 edition of *Oliver Twist*, Dickens records that even as late as 1850 a London alderman had stated in public that such a place did not exist and never had existed. So little did the alderman know of his own London. Yet so appalling was the condition of Jacob's Island that the enclosing ditch was sewer as well as reservoir—'the only source from which the wretched inhabitants can get the water which they drink, with which they wash, and with which they cook their victuals. . . . In the bright light it appeared the colour of strong green tea.'¹

¹ Thomas Beames, *The Rookeries of London*.

The river scene was changing as quickly as the land scene in Dickens's day. On 1 January, 1861, he wrote to Cerjat about a walk he had taken by Millbank: 'I walked straight on *for three miles* on a splendid broad esplanade overhanging the Thames, with immense factories, railway works, and what-not erected on it, and with the strangest beginnings and ends of wealthy streets pushing themselves into the very Thames. When I was a rower on that river, it was all broken ground and ditch, with here and there a public-house or two, an old mill, and a tall chimney. I had never seen it in any stage of transition, though I suppose myself to know this rather large city as well as anyone in it.'

The bridges as well as the embankments were news at this time, as we see from the way Dickens refers to them—most notably, perhaps, in *Great Expectations*, where, when Pip asks Jaggers about lending money to a friend, he gets the extraordinary answer:

' "Mr. Pip, I should like just to run over with you on my fingers, if you please, the names of the bridges up as high as Chelsea Reach. Let's see; there's London, one; Southwark, two; Blackfriars, three; Waterloo, four; Westminster, five; Vauxhall, six. There's as many as six, you see, to choose from."

' "I don't understand you," said I.

' "Choose your bridge, Mr. Pip, and take a walk upon your bridge, and pitch your money into the Thames over the centre arch of your bridge, and you know the end of it."

But the prospect from these bridges must have remained unpleasant practically to the end of his life. It is true that Betsey Trotwood allowed that the Thames 'really did look well with the sun upon it, though not like the sea before her cottage', but when Dickens was forty-six he could still write to Cerjat, 'The Thames in London is most horrible. I have to cross Waterloo or London Bridge to get to the rail-road when I come here, and I can certify that the offensive smells, even in that short whiff, have been of the most head-and-stomach distending nature.' The conditions described in

Little Dorrit could not be remedied overnight. There we read that when Arthur Clennam arrived from Marseilles, 'Fifty thousand lairs surrounded him where people lived so unwholesomely, that fair water put into their crowded rooms on Saturday night, would be corrupt on Sunday morning. . . . Miles of close wells and pits of houses, where the inhabitants gasped for air, stretched far away towards every point of the compass. Through the heart of the town a deadly sewer ebbed and flowed in the place of a fine river.'

Interesting as they were, however, none of the new bridges ever detracted from the appeal of London Bridge itself, and Dickens, with his finger on the cockney pulse, keeps it to the fore, mentioning it in the most casual conversations. And was it not from Fresh Wharf on the City side of the bridge that Mrs. Gamp enquired which was 'The Ankworks package', and when told, devoutly wished it 'in Jonadge's belly'?

The riverside underworld fascinated Dickens, and once again it was a fascination that could be traced back to that same hypersensitive period of his life, the four months of his father's imprisonment. At all events it was then that the darker and more sinister aspects of the river put a spell on him. He tells us how he would wander in those days about the Adelphi, 'because it was a mysterious place, with those dark arches'. It was in those days, too, that after an evening's walk he would come 'on a little public-house close to the river, with an open space before it, where some coal-heavers were dancing.'

From those first impressions developed the half-real, half-fanciful concept that found expression in his many descriptions of rotting wharves, slimy steps, and derelict shacks. The river, restless and inscrutable, came to symbolize for him the blindness of Destiny, the soul-destroying inhuman force that he hated but could not subdue. At times it acted on him like a drug, producing the morbid but poetic moods that dominate some of his most telling descriptions. It was always irrational—as irrational as life itself appeared to him in youth. It was the power that could

destroy such brutes as Sikes and Quilp. It could never be tamed, and only those who sold themselves to it body and soul, as the witches were supposed to have sold themselves to the Devil in earlier times—people like Gaffer Hexam—could exploit it.

Gaffer Hexam is the evil spirit of the river, or at least of that part of it which, in *Our Mutual Friend*:

*Slouches sullen and obscene
Hard on the skirts of the embittered night.*

The story, as all who have read it remember, opens with 'a boat of dirty and disreputable appearance, with two figures in it', floating on the Thames as an autumn evening is closing in. The elder of the pair was Gaffer Hexam, the other his nineteen-year-old daughter, Lizzie, who bent to the oars as her father screwed up his keen old eyes to sweep the river for whatever the tide washed down, concentrating his gaze on every race and eddy for traces of floating wreckage either human or material, to be dragged into the boat with the aid of a coil of rope and a rusty boat-hook. The most welcome prizes were the bodies of drowned men with a few coins in the pockets of their saturated clothes. Gaffer Hexam had no twinges of conscience, or whatever it was in his warped personality that served the purpose of that monitor, in appropriating such finds to his own use. 'Has a dead man to have money?' he asked. 'Is it possible for a dead man to have money? What world does a dead man belong to? T'other world. What world does money belong to? This world. How can money be a corpse's?'

When Lightwood and Eugene Wrayburn went to inspect one of these ghastly prizes, they made their way 'down by the Monument, and by the Tower, and by the Docks; down by Ratcliffe and by Rotherhithe; down by where accumulated scum of humanity seemed to be washed from higher grounds, like so much moral sewage, and to be pausing until its own height forced it over the bank and sunk it in the river. In and out among vessels that seemed to have got ashore and houses that seemed to have got afloat;

among bowsprits staring into windows, and windows staring into ships; the wheels rolled on until they stopped at a dark corner, river washed, and otherwise not washed at all, where the boy alighted and opened the door.' Before long they reached the Hexams' dwelling, which was an old building with 'a rotten wart of wood upon its forehead' that looked as if it had been a windmill. The wart in question, it is suggested, served to mark the place where the sails had been. Like all the buildings in Dickens it was given a personality, with physical features—eyes, nose, face, and body—to express itself through. The body of Gaffer Hexam's abode was a poor starved affair; but it had seen better days. There can be little doubt about its origin. It had, in fact, been one of the many windmills that had stood on the river banks long before most of the embankments were made, and had continued to mark the course of the stream as it wound through the marshes east of London, right through to Dickens's time. The circular ground floor, with the fire in a rusty brazier, showed that. All the furniture in this queer dwelling had been taken from the sea at some time, and most of it must have had grim associations for Lizzie if not for the gaffer. The river had been his life, and day after day, 'at every mooring-chain and rope, at every stationary boat or barge that split the current into a broad arrow-head, at the offsets from the piers of Southwark Bridge, at the paddles of the river steamboats as they beat the filthy water, at the floating logs of timber lashed together lying off certain wharfs, his shining eyes darted a hungry look'. The Thames is the haunting refrain of the book, with its craft and water drifting on interminably past the derelict buildings that cower grey and shrunken along the banks. We remember how Eugene Wrayburn told Mortimer that the black and white letters on the wharves and warehouses 'looked like inscriptions over the graves of dead businesses'.

Shadwell, Wapping, and Rotherhithe were places of enchantment to Dickens, little as we might suspect the possibility of such a thing today. Everything he saw there

took colour in his mind from the river and from the strange life that was lived on it:

'As they glided slowly on, keeping under the shore, and sneaking in and out among the shipping, by back-alleys of water, in a pilfering way that seemed to be their boatman's normal manner of progression, all the objects among which they crept were so huge in contrast with their wretched boat as to threaten to crush it. Not a ship's hull, with its rusty iron links of a cable run out of hawse-holes long discoloured with the iron's rusty tears, but seemed to be there with a fell intention. Not a figure-head but had the menacing look of bursting forward to run them down. Not a sluice gate, or a painted scale upon a post or wall, showing the depth of water, but seemed to hint, like the dreadfully facetious wolf in bed in Grandmamma's cottage, "That's to drown *you* in, my dears!" Not a lumbering black barge, with its cracked and blistered side impending over them, but seemed to suck at the river with a thirst for sucking them under. And everything so vaunted the spoiling influences of water—discoloured copper, rotten wood, honeycombed stone, green dank deposit—that the after-consequences of being crushed, sucked under, and drawn down, looked as ugly to the imagination as the main event.' Not even churches escape this weird transformation: 'In this region,' we read in *Our Mutual Friend*, 'are a certain little street called Church Street, and a certain little blind square called Smith Square, in the centre of which last retreat is a very hideous church, with four towers at the four corners, generally resembling some petrified monster, frightful and gigantic, on its back with its feet in the air.' This, if you please, is a description of St. John the Evangelist in Smith Square!

Below bridges, life was more friendly if no less sinful. 'Down by the Docks,' he tells us in *The Uncommercial Traveller*, 'they eat the largest oysters and scatter the roughest oyster shells known to the descendants of Saint George and the Dragon. Down by the Docks, they consume the slimiest of shell-fish, which seem to have been scraped

off the copper bottoms of ships. . . . Down by the Docks, they "board seamen" at the eating-houses, the public-houses, the slop-shops, the coffee-shops, the tally-shops, all kinds of shops mentionable and unmentionable—board them as it were, in the piratical sense, making them bleed terribly, and giving no quarter.' And the best of all the places providing hospitality in this region was the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters, which until recently was always identified as the Grapes in Limehouse. This house was destroyed in the blitz of the Second World War, but has now been rebuilt. It overlooks the river in Narrow Street, where it is described in Dickens as having 'a crazy wooden verandah impending over the water'. Recently, however, claims have been put in for The Prospect of Whitby being the original of the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters. The interior of this romantic tavern, which 'stood dropsically bulging over the causeway', was 'not much larger than a hackney coach, girt in by corpulent little casks and by cordial bottles radiant with fictitious grapes in bunches, and by lemons in nets, and by biscuits in baskets, and by polite beer pulls that made low bows when customers were served with beer, and by the cheese in a snug corner near the fire with the cloth everlastingly laid'.

Rogue Riderhood, the blackmailing waterside villain in *Our Mutual Friend*, 'dwelt deep and dark in Limehouse Hole, amongst the riggers, and the mast, oar and block makers, and the boat-builders, and the sail-lofts . . . in a wretched little shop, with a roof that any man standing in it could touch with his hand; little better than a cellar or cave, down three steps'.

All the happier associations of these riverside hamlets came down from the time when he first discovered the neighbourhood in his boyhood visits to his godfather, and saw again the carefree, bustling waterfront life he had known and loved at Chatham, in which there might be—indeed was—poverty, hardship, depression, but nowhere the stagnation that Dickens always found insufferable, even when it was that of wealth and bore a prettier name. The

river meant movement, and movement was life to him in youth as well as in age. The sweets of contemplation were not for Dickens. Moreover, it was only in such places as this that characters like Captain Cuttle could be found—Captain Cuttle, who was modelled on Christopher Huffam, and who, we are told, ‘lived on the brink of a little canal near the India Docks, where there was a swivel bridge which opened now and then to let some wandering monster of a ship come roaming up the street like a stranded leviathan. The gradual change from land to water, on the approach to Captain Cuttle’s lodgings was curious. It began with the erection of flagstaffs, as appurtenances to public-houses; then came slopsellers’ shops, with Guernsey shirts, sou’wester hats, and canvas pantaloons, at once the tightest and loosest of their order, hanging up outside. These were succeeded by anchor and chain-cable forges, where sledge-hammers were dinging upon iron all day long. Then came rows of houses, with little vane-surmounted masts uprearing themselves from among the scarlet beans. Then ditches. Then pollard willows. Then more ditches. Then unaccountable patches of dirty water, hardly to be descried, for the ships that covered them. Then the air was perfumed with chips; and all the other trades were swallowed up in mast, oar, and block-making, and boat-building. Then the ground grew marshy and unsettled. Then there was nothing to be smelt but rum and sugar. Then Captain Cuttle’s lodgings—at once a first floor and a top-storey, in Brig Place—were close before you.’ That, we feel, is exactly how it was.

From here Dickens would explore the creeks and inlets of the Thames, and discover that there was drama to be found at other bridges besides those of the main stream. There was Gravel Lane Bridge in the parish of St. George’s in the East, which was known as the Bridge of Sighs, because so many desperate people had committed suicide there. Gravel Lane Bridge spanned the ‘Baker’s Trap’ mentioned in *The Uncommercial Traveller*. Dickens tells us that as he stood on the bridge he asked the ghost of a young man who appeared to him what it was called.

"A common place for suicide," said I, looking down at the locks.

"Sue," returned the ghost, with a stare. "Yes! and Poll, likewise Emily, and Nancy, and Jane . . . and all the biling, ketches off their bonnets or shorls, take a run and headers down here, they doos. Always a-headering down here, they is. Like one o'clock."'

But the marvel of East London in Dickens's youth was the construction of the docks. The five big docks prior to the Royal Docks were built between 1800 and 1828, and these transformed the whole of the region east of the Tower as well as the water-front, particularly when in 1810 Commercial Road was completed between Whitechapel and the East and West India Docks, which were the farthest east, replacing the notorious Ratcliffe Highway, which had hitherto linked the ancient river-side settlements of Wapping, Shadwell, Stepney, and Limehouse, with the beautiful church of St. Anne to civilize the scene at the far end. Even in those days of comparatively slow progress, buildings appeared to go up overnight in the bleak stretches behind Commercial Road, to house the new population that spread across this wilderness of marsh and potato field between the Isle of Dogs and Hackney Downs immediately following the construction of the docks. In 1849 social workers lamented that Bethnal Green parish had only three clergymen to care for the souls of eighty thousand people. By this time the docks were able to accommodate two thousand vessels, which directly and indirectly meant the employment of a vast industrial population quite unconnected with the life of the City. Consequently, London east of the Tower became a segregated region and the most populous of the new self-contained units of population which as the century progressed were to become more and more a feature of London life, with the gap between the privileged and the depressed constantly widening. To Dickens any kind of standardized life was dull, and life is bound to be standardized wherever large-scale industry dragoons the entire population of a region into uniform employment. It is not always

remembered that when Dickens was young the suburbs of east London were more respectable on the whole than those of the west. In the eighteenth century Bethnal Green, for example, had been a colony of highly respectable French weavers. Farther east the well-known merchant and banking families—such as the Frys and Gurneys—were settled. And these had individuality as well as respectability. It was the former, of course, and not the latter that appealed to Dickens. And so it was all the way down the social scale to the mudlarks and flotsam and jetsam of river and riverside life. Most of the businesses along the water-front in Dickens's youth were family concerns, like that of Christopher Huffam himself, who followed his calling of Rigger to His Majesty's Navy, ship's chandler and contractor, where his father and grandfather had worked at their riverside crafts before him.

Downstream from the docks lay the marshes, with their wide landscape intersected by ditches lined with pollarded willows, and with an occasional windmill to be descried against the skyline. They were a region as lonely and disconsolate as Dockland was bustling and crowded. But great as the contrast was—because of it, perhaps—the marshes were equally fascinating to Dickens, and a region on which his descriptive powers became poetic as well as dramatic. 'Ours was the marsh country,' he writes in *Great Expectations*, 'down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea . . . and that dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that low leaden line beyond was the river; and that distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea.'

It was a region he was to know intimately in his later years, when the marsh country of the Hundred of Hoo, easily accessible to such a walker as himself, became to him in his last years what the streets of London had been earlier, the place where he would work off his restless energy and find stimulus for his imagination. After such walks he would

describe the scene again and again, varying the mood according to his present purpose. Thus, in contrast to the passage just quoted we have later: 'And now the range of marshes lay clear before us, with the sails of the ships on the river growing out of it; and we went into the churchyard . . . and the light wind strewed it with beautiful shadows, of clouds and trees.'

In order to familiarize himself with the scene he was to describe in *Great Expectations*, which is to the river as it flows through the marshes what *Our Mutual Friend* is to it as it flows—or flowed—through London, Dickens hired a Blackwall-to-Southend steamer for the day, and, says Forster, with eight or nine friends, and three or four members of his own family, he spent the whole summer day in May 1861 with no care 'except to enjoy their enjoyment and entertain them with his own in shape of a thousand whims and fancies; but his sleepless observation was at work all the time, and nothing had escaped his keen vision on either side of the river'. The result was a chapter with which a Trinity House pilot could find no fault.

So that he would not arouse suspicion when the time for the attempted escape came round, Pip kept a boat at Temple Stairs long enough to gain confidence in himself and allay suspicion in others. At first he kept above Blackfriars Bridge. Later he ventured through the arches of London Bridge—the old bridge—where, he says, 'at certain states of the tide there was a race and a fall of water there which gave it a bad reputation. But I knew well enough how to "shoot" the bridge after seeing it done, and so began to row about among the shipping in the Pool, and down to Erith.' This passage, incidentally, shows that the time of the story is prior to the building of the new bridge, of which the first pile was driven in 1824.

The chapter in which the voyage is described, the fifty-fourth, is one of the best descriptive chapters in the whole of Dickens. Pip's object, it will be recalled, was to get the escaped convict, Magwitch, on board the Hamburg steamer, which was to leave London Bridge on the ebb tide, and was

expected to be in the reaches below Gravesend about one o'clock in the afternoon. This was to be the point of interception because if such an enterprise was suspected in London it was customary to have the boats searched at Gravesend. Below Gravesend, it was thought, a man could be taken on board without anyone being the wiser. The plan, therefore, was to put out from Temple Stairs about eight-thirty the previous morning. 'The tide, beginning to run down at nine, and being with us until three,' says Pip, 'we intended still to creep on after it had turned and row against it until dark. We should then be well in those long reaches below Gravesend where the river is broad and solitary.'

The run of the channel, and the tidal currents of the estuary, are such as to make the course of Pip's boat far from obvious to the uninitiated. Colonel Gadd, an authority on Dickens as well as on the estuary, tells us that it would hug the Essex bank in Gravesend Reach, then cross to the south bank near Cliffe Creek, to return to the north bank by changing course at Lower Hope Point and steering for a point a little to the west of Mucking Lighthouse. Here, says Pip, 'we got ashore among some slippery stones. . . . It was like my own marsh country, flat and monotonous, and with a dim horizon.' The significance of this remark is that Pip describes the country as 'like' his own. He would not have said this if it had, in fact, been his own country, that is to say, the marshes of the Hundred of Hoo. We are also told that the landing-place was close to 'a little squat shoal-lighthouse on open piles', which stood 'crippled in the mud on stilts and crutches', where 'slimy stakes stuck out of the mud'. There can be no doubt whatever about this. It was the stony spit running out into the mud flats about a mile west of Mucking Lighthouse, close to a line of black stakes known as 'farmer's teeth', which was the only landing-place within miles. It was built in 1851 on the mud flats at the north end of the Lower Hope.

From Mucking they continued their course downstream towards Canvey, and as the tide raised the level of the boat

Pip was able to see over the embankment, and across the marshes, to where the sun was setting behind Tilbury. It was now time for them to seek shelter for the night, and they decided that the place to make for was the Lobster Smack on Canvey Island, which meant that they were obliged to ply their oars through the gathering darkness for another 'four or five dull miles' before they could land from the old stone causeway at Hole Haven, which is close to the little alehouse.

Although the fifty-fourth chapter of *Great Expectations* is in a class of its own in the literature of the estuary, it is by no means the only description of London River in Dickens. There is a little-known sketch called *Down with the Tide* in *Miscellaneous Pieces*, in which the author describes the river as seen from a four-oared Thames galley, and references in the novels. That Dickens loved the lower reaches of the Thames is shown in his memories of trips on the Pay-Office yacht from Chatham as a boy, in his choice of a home overlooking it in later life, and—most of all, perhaps—in his choice of Chalk, near Gravesend, as the place for his honeymoon.



CHAPTER VI

MR. PICKWICK'S KENT

IT was while spending his honeymoon at Chalk, between Gravesend and Gad's Hill, in 1836, that Dickens either wrote or conceived some of the best pages of *Pickwick*, including those about Cobham, Cob-tree Manor, and Muggleton. The cottage in which he and his sweet, but too submissive, bride stayed was only a mile out of Gravesend, about which Dickens says curiously little. No one knows why. He stayed in the town while Gad's Hill Place was being made ready for him in 1857, and there must have been frequent visits both before and after that date. He certainly spent a night in Gravesend with Forster in 1841, and in later life must often have driven through the town in his pony chaise, with his dogs running behind. But the town never appealed to him. When Mr. Joseph Tuggs in *Sketches by Boz* suggested Gravesend for a family holiday 'the idea was unanimously scouted. Gravesend was *low*.' Mr. Peggotty and Ham landed there from a Yarmouth lug when they visited David Copperfield at Salem House, Blackheath, and it was from Gravesend that Mr. Peggotty and Mr. Micawber sailed. It has, in fact, a fair list of references in the Dickens index; but they are all to such casual matters as landings and embarkations.

In Kent, as in all other fruit-growing counties, the best time of year is May, and it was on the 13th of that month, in the year 1827, that Mr. Pickwick and his friends came down into Kent on the Commodore coach, which they boarded in the yard of the Golden Cross Inn by Charing Cross, proceeding towards the Dover Road, it is to be noted, not by way of London Bridge, but over Westminster Bridge to the Elephant and Castle, and so to the Old Kent Road. Once again we have a reminiscence of childhood when Jingle, on being asked if he has any luggage, replies: 'Who

—I? Brown-paper parcel here, that's all, other luggage gone by water—packing cases, nailed up—big as houses,' which was how the Dickens family luggage had gone from Chatham to London a few years earlier, and perhaps how John Dickens had spoken of it.

How Dickens loved the road—loved it most of all for its inns and chance acquaintances; but almost as much for its wide prospects! In *The Uncommercial Traveller* he carries us breathlessly along this same historic highway, the road he knew best of all. 'I got into the travelling chariot—it was of German make, roomy, heavy, and unvarnished—I got into the travelling chariot, pulled up the steps after me, shut myself in with a smart bang of the door, and gave the word, "Go on!"' Immediately, all the W. and S.W. Division of London began to slide away at a pace so lively, that I was over the river, and past the Old Kent Road, and out on Blackheath, and even ascending Shooter's Hill, before I had had time to look about me in the carriage, like a collected traveller.

'Over the road where the old Romans used to march, over the road where the old Canterbury pilgrims used to go, over the road where the travelling trains of the old imperious priests and princes used to jingle on horseback between the Continent and this Island through the mud and water, over the road where Shakespeare hummed to himself, "Blow, blow, thou winter wind," as he sat in the saddle at the gate of the inn yard noticing the carriers; all among the cherry orchards, apple orchards, cornfields and hop-gardens; so went I, by Canterbury to Dover.'

Mr. Pickwick's journey into Kent did not extend beyond Rochester and Maidstone—the part, that is to say, which Dickens himself had already discovered, either in boyhood or during his honeymoon at Chalk in 1836, when he and his bride would explore it together, and in spring. The marriage of Dickens with Catherine Hogarth was solemnized at St. Luke's Church, Chelsea, on 2 April, and it may have been due to the happiness he was then experiencing in his young wife's company that he was apparently so unobservant

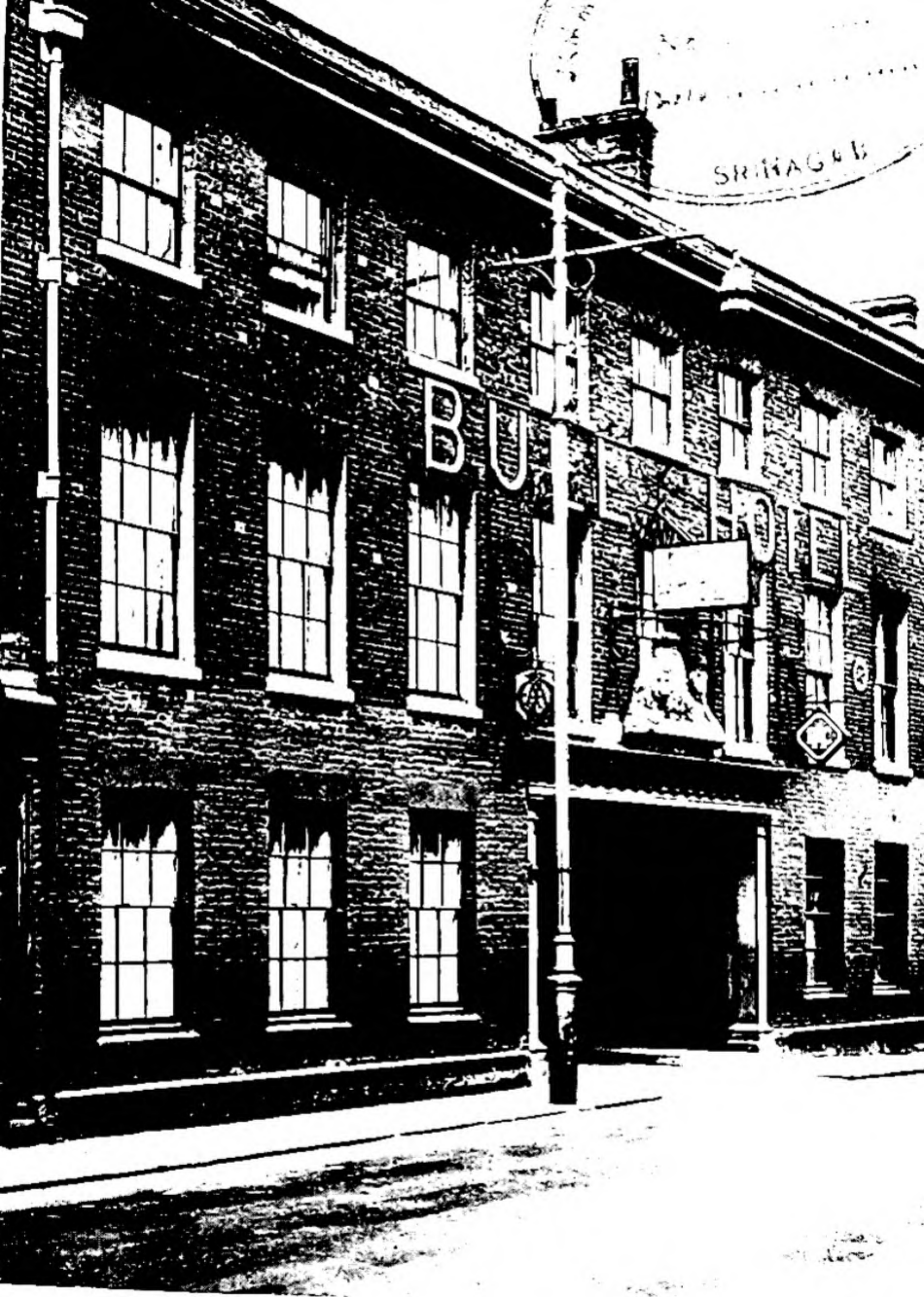
of the road on this occasion. In *Pickwick* he covers the lapse by relating Jingle's entertaining anecdote about Ponto, the wonderful dog, and Donna Christina, the beautiful Spanish lady. But in other books he makes good this omission by describing it fully. For *Oliver Twist*, anyhow, there were no sentimental distractions as he tramped the Dover road, mile after dreary mile. The Old Kent Road for him was the place where he sold his 'weskit' to Mr. Dolloby; Blackheath was where, after searching out his old school, Salem House, he fell asleep against a haystack and dreamt of Steerforth, Traddles, and the rest of his friends. And in the second chapter of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens relates how, when the Dover coach was 'lumbering up' Shooter's Hill on a Friday night in November 1775, the guard and passengers were so afraid of being stopped by highwaymen that 'the guard suspected the passengers, the passengers suspected one another and the guards, they all suspected everybody else, and the coachman was sure of nothing but the horses'.

In *Pickwick Papers*, then, the bridge at Rochester is reached surprisingly quickly, and before the eyes of the strangely assorted company rose the noble spectacle that not even a honeymoon couple could miss—Rochester Castle.

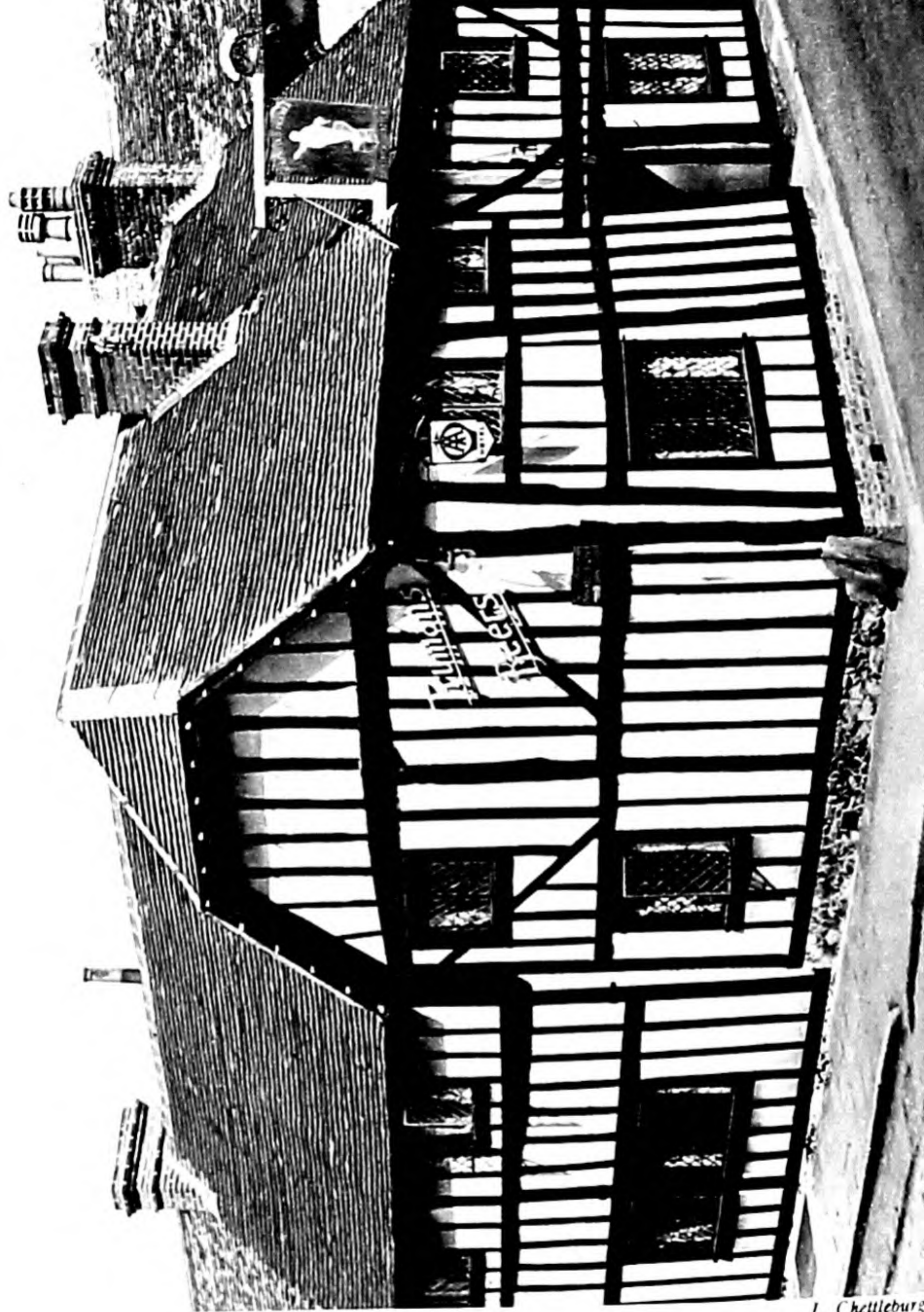
' "Magnificent ruin!" said Mr. Augustus Snodgrass, with all the poetic fervour that distinguished him, when they came in sight of the fine old castle.

' "What a sight for an antiquarian!" were the very words which fell from Mr. Pickwick's mouth, as he applied his telescope to his eye.

' "Ah! fine place," said the stranger, "glorious pile—frowning walls—tottering arches—dark nooks—crumbling staircases—Old cathedral too—earthy smell—pilgrims' feet worn away the old steps—little Saxon doors—confessionals like money-takers' boxes at theatres—queer customers those monks—Popes, and Lord Treasurers, and all sorts of old fellows, with great red faces, and broken noses, turning up every day—buff jerkins too—match-locks—Sarcophagus—fine place—old legends too—strange stories: capital." ' With this light-hearted and inadequate commentary these illus-



THE BULL HOTEL, ROCHESTER



J. Chettleburg

THE LEATHER BOTTLE, COBHAM, KENT

trious passengers rattled over Rochester Bridge and into the Bull yard. Mr. Pickwick at least might have been expected to think of something more intelligent to say; but in the second chapter of the chronicle this learned and benevolent gentleman was restricted by the limitations of his youthful creator, who at the time knew little more than Jingle about such things. In *One Man in a Dockyard*, however, a joint contribution by Dickens and R. H. Horne to *Household Words*, for which Horne wrote the dockyard part and Dickens the rest, he did better justice to it:

'There was Rochester Castle, to begin with,' he wrote, 'I surveyed the massive ruin from the Bridge, and thought what a brief practical joke I seemed to be, in comparison with its solidity, stature, strength, and length of life. I went inside; and, standing in the solemn shadow of its walls, looking up at the blue sky, its only remaining roof (to the disturbance of the crows and jackdaws who garrison the venerable fortress now), calculated how much wall of that thickness I, or any other man, could build in his whole life—say from eight years old to eighty—and what a ridiculous result would be produced. I climbed the rugged staircase, stopping now and then to peep at great holes where the rafters and floors were once—bare as toothless gums now—or to enjoy glimpses of the Medway through dreary apertures like sockets without eyes; and, looking from the Castle ramparts on the Old Cathedral, and the crumbling remains of the old Priory, and on the row of staid old red-brick houses where the Cathedral dignitaries live, and on the shrunken fragments of one of the old City gates, and on the old trees with their high tops below me, felt quite apologetic to the scene in general for my own juvenility and insignificance. One of the river boatmen had told me on the bridge (as country folks do tell of such places) that in the old times, when those buildings were in progress, a labourer's wages "were a penny a day, and enough too". Even as a solitary penny was to their whole cost, it appeared to me, was the utmost strength and exertion of one man towards the labour of their erection.'

The Bull Inn, where Dickens himself was to stay in more affluent days, was more congenial to the mood of the Pickwickians at this stage. It was recommended to them by Jingle as a 'good house—nice beds', and superior to Wright's, which was 'dear—very dear—half-a-crown in the bill if you look at the waiter—charge you more if you dine at a friend's than they would if you dined in the coffee-room—rum fellows—very'. The Bull at Rochester is still redolent of the days of haunches of venison, saddles of mutton, and ribs of beef—in a word, of Dickensian England. And although the yard is smaller than it was in 1827, and the great stables have gone, to the reader of *Pickwick* the place is so vividly conceived that what is lacking to the vision can quickly be supplied by memory, so that when he climbs the stairs to the ballroom, or assembly-room, in which the most elegant charity and county balls were held, although it is now the dining-room, the man who knows his *Pickwick* can still see it as it was when the more susceptible members of the party took the floor on that May night in 1827.

'It was a long room,' he recalls, 'with crimson-covered benches, and wax-candles in glass chandeliers, in which the musicians were 'securely confined in an elevated den.' And he imagines the scene with quadrilles being 'systematically got through by two or three sets of dancers', and with the two card-tables in the adjoining card-room, where 'two pair of old ladies, and a corresponding number of old gentlemen, were executing whist', although he can hardly fail to be conscious that the red benches and hanging glass chandeliers have gone. Bedroom 17, which Dickens himself occupied on more than one occasion, was the one Mr. Pickwick slept in; Nos. 13 and 19 were those of Messrs. Tupman and Winkle respectively.

Downstairs, we remember that it was in the bar, just opposite the coffee-room, that Tracy Tupman bought tickets for the ball, and that the friends of Dr. Slammer, the 'little fat man, with a ring of upright black hair round his head, and an extensive bald patch on the top of it', subsequently

enquired for the owner of a certain incriminating coat. Both bar and coffee-room have been altered since then, to meet the needs of a different age.

The street outside is still 'full of gables, with old beams and timbers carved into strange faces', and 'furnished with a queer clock that projects over the pavement out of a grave red-brick building, as if time carried on business and hung out his sign', although the Corn Exchange from which it projects has now been turned to other uses. Other changes, of course, have been made. Seldom, however, are they sufficiently drastic to make it impossible for us to reconstruct the Pickwickian scene. The beautiful Rochester Bridge over which Mr. Pickwick leaned while his breakfast was being cooked was blown up by the Royal Engineers in 1856, but some of its elegant balustrades were retained as coping for the esplanade embankment, and we may lean over these and think of the day when: 'Bright and pleasant was the sky, balmy the air, and beautiful the appearance of every object around, as Mr. Pickwick leant over the balustrades of Rochester Bridge, contemplating nature and waiting for breakfast. The scene was indeed one which might well have charmed a far less reflective mind, than that to which it was represented.' It would be false to suggest that the scene from the bridge is as idyllic now as it was in Mr. Pickwick's time. Today it is often blurred by cement dust, and the stream of traffic over the present bridge, built in the First World War, is almost as incessant and surging as that of the water below it. For all that, given moderate powers of detachment and average imagination there is no difficulty in seeing the banks as Dickens describes them: 'covered with corn-fields and pastures, with here and there a windmill, or a distant church, stretched away as far as the eye could see, presenting a rich and varied landscape, rendered more beautiful by the changing shadows which passed swiftly across it, as the thin and half-formed clouds skimmed away in the light of the morning sun. The river, reflecting the clear blue of the sky, glistened and sparkled as it flowed noiselessly on; and the oars of the fishermen dipped into the

water with a clear and liquid sound, as their heavy but picturesque boats glided slowly down the stream.'

Although the Bull is pre-eminently the inn of *Pickwick Papers* it figures in *Great Expectations* as the Blue Boar. There is, in fact, a Blue Boar in Rochester High Street; but from the description in the novel no one can doubt that the Bull was again in the writer's mind when he wanted a place for a special celebration. So when Miss Havisham gave Pip the twenty-five guineas from which the premium was to be paid for him to be bound apprentice to his brother-in-law, Joe Gargery, his sister 'became so excited . . . that nothing would serve but we must have a dinner out of that windfall at the Blue Boar, and that Pumblechook must go over in his chaise cart, and bring the Hubbles and Mr. Wopsle'. On this occasion, Pip tells us, 'among the festivities indulged in rather late in the evening, Mr. Wopsle gave us *Collins's Ode*, and "threw his blood stain'd sword in thunder down", with such effect, that a waiter came in and said "the Commercial underneath sent up their compliments, and it wasn't the Tumblers' Arms".' The Commercial Room, which was on the other side of the archway from the coffee-room, was later converted into a restaurant, but the room above it, and partly over the archway, is still much as it was when Mr. Wopsle caused such a stir with his rendering of *Collins's Ode*. In the Guildhall opposite assembled the Justices—one in powdered wig. And there in judicial repose, 'leaning back in chairs, with folded arms, or taking snuff, or going to sleep, or writing, or reading the newspapers', they saw to the signing and attesting of Pip's indentures.

It was inevitable that the first of Mr. Pickwick's peregrinations should have brought him to Rochester, of which he observed that the principal productions appeared to be 'soldiers, sailors, Jews, chalk, shrimps, officers, and Dock-yard men', and 'the commodities chiefly exposed for sale . . . marine stores, hard-bake, apples, flat-fish, and oysters'. He noticed further that the streets presented 'a lively and animated appearance, occasioned chiefly by the conviviality

of the military'. The tobacconists, he thought, must have been doing good business in the two towns of Rochester and Chatham jointly and severally, because the smell of that weed, he noticed, pervaded the streets the whole time. At the same time he observed with regret that Rochester and Chatham were dirty towns. But this again would be gratifying to some people, because in the nineteenth century dirt suggested commerce, and commerce prosperity.

To Jingle, and no doubt to Dickens, Kent had other and more romantic titles to fame. 'Kent, sir,' Jingle exclaimed when Tracy Tupman asked if there were many fine women in the town, 'Kent, sir—everybody knows Kent—apples, cherries, hops, and women.' And for these, at all events, its fame continues.

In Chatham there was something else to be seen—a sight for which the entire population turned out. This occurred when troops were reviewed in the famous Chatham Lines, as the local fortifications are called. In those days they were, in fact, most impressive, extending from Gillingham to Brompton. At the particular Grand Review attended by Mr. Pickwick and his friends on their third day in Kent, additional fortifications had been erected, and the commander-in-chief had come down to inspect the manœuvres of half a dozen regiments distributed about the field of operations. To Mr. Pickwick, who was an enthusiastic admirer of the Forces of the Crown, this was an inspiring spectacle, and one to which full justice is done in the *Papers*. The actual scene of the review, at which, as usual, Mr. Pickwick's party got into difficulties, was a field adjoining Fort Pitt, where the Fort Pitt School stands now—the piece of ground where the duel was to take place between the irate Dr. Slammer and the terrified Winkle.

The breezy situation of the 'Lines' involved Mr. Pickwick in a mishap which prepared the way for the next adventure of the party. His hat blew off, and, after an exhausting chase, came to rest against the wheel of the open barouche which contained the delightful family who turned out to be the Wardles of Manor Farm, Dingley Dell, attended, we

may remember, by the incorrigible red- and fat-faced boy who lived in a more or less permanent state of somnolency. The portrait, we are told, was based on a boyhood acquaintance of Dickens named James Budden, whose father kept the Red Lion at the corner of High Street and Military Road, Chatham, which in 1838, and no doubt earlier, was the town's principal posting-house.

The result of this happy encounter was that the Pickwickians were invited to Manor Farm, Dingley Dell, of which the hard-headed man with the pippin face said, 'There an't a better spot o' ground in all Kent, Sir.' He was probably right. Certainly the description of it in *Pickwick* goes a long way towards justifying the claim. After passing the night in sound and dreamless sleep there, Mr. Pickwick rose early and, opening the lattice, reflected on the folly of living in towns, with nothing to gaze on but bricks and slates, when there was such pleasant country as this to live in. 'The rich, sweet smell of the hay-ricks rose to his chamber window; the hundred perfumes of the little flower-garden beneath scented the air around; the deep-green meadows shone in the morning dew that glistened on every leaf as it trembled in the gentle air; and the birds sang as if every sparkling drop were to them a fountain of inspiration.' What wonder, then, that Mr. Pickwick should have fallen into 'an enchanting and delicious reverie'.

Manor Farm, Dingley Dell, is one of the few places in Dickens which are given fictitious names; but for a long time it was universally believed that the prototype was Cob Tree Hall, or Manor, near Aylesford, in the grounds of which is now the Maidstone Zoo. The evidence in favour of this identification is still strong, particularly so, it is argued, because its tenants at the time Dickens was writing *Pickwick Papers* so closely resembled the Wardles. Indeed the Spongs of Cob Tree Hall themselves claimed to be the Wardles of *Pickwick*, and William Spong, one of several members of the family commemorated on a handsome tomb in Aylesford churchyard, is stated to be the original of Mr. Wardle of Dingley Dell. He is described as 'late of Cob Tree, in the

parish of Boxley, who died November 15th, 1839'. Moreover, Dingley, it has been pointed out, is obtained by combining the terminals of Sandling and Boxley, the hamlet and parish in which Dingley is situated. But is there any reason for believing that person and place must be identified together? Apparently, Cob Tree Hall was first stated in print to be Manor Farm, Aylesford, by Hughes, on the strength of arguments in its favour put to him by a Mr. Cobb of Rochester. The question that does not appear to some of us to have been adequately examined is whether Dickens himself was acquainted with this part of Kent when he wrote those chapters. Nor do the early illustrations help. The drawings made in 1837 by Onwhyn for the first cheap edition, some of which are stated to have been made 'on the spot', are of a Kentish farmhouse altogether too typical in character to be recognized.

There have been far too many hasty identifications in this part of the county. It has been suggested more than once that the Running Horse Inn, at the junction of the road from Cob Tree Hall and the main Rochester to Maidstone road, was the site of the catastrophe on the drive to Dingley Dell; but this seems most unlikely. It has also been suggested that the 'wooden bridge' against which the curious little conveyance was dashed to pieces was Aylesford Bridge; but this can hardly have been intended by Dickens. Apart from the fact that it is an imposing stone bridge with six arches, dating from the thirteenth century, it is too near Dingley Dell for the purpose of the story. It seems much more likely that he was thinking not of a bridge but of a wooden railing, such as were frequently to be found at the time, separating the road from a pond, which cannot have been far along the road, because after an hour's walk the travellers were still 'better er seven mile' from Dingley Dell.

The other serious claimant to the honours of Dingley Dell is Birling Place,¹ the old home of the Neville family, a commodious Tudor farmhouse below the North Downs, which fits the description admirably. It is about twelve

¹ *The Dickensian*, XXIV, 225.

miles from Rochester. Dickens himself said Manor Farm was fifteen miles from Rochester; but he wouldn't have a speedometer fitted to his pony-chaise. If the Birling Place identification is accepted, the White Horse Inn at Harvel would probably be the place where the red-headed man refused to take charge of the runaway horse. This inn has been rebuilt. In Dickens's time, with its elm trees and horse trough, it was exactly the kind of inn to captivate his imagination.

The other topographical puzzle in *Pickwick* is Muggleton, for which Maidstone and West Malling are the principal claimants. From Dingley Dell, we may remember, the party walked over to Muggleton for the cricket match between the All Muggletonians and the Dingley Dellers, and 'as their walk, which was not above two miles long, lay through shady lanes, and sequestered footpaths, and as their conversation turned upon the delightful scenery, by which they were on every side surrounded, Mr. Pickwick was almost inclined to regret the expedition they had used, when he found himself in the main street of the town of Muggleton'. West Malling is about two and a half miles from Birling; but the truth is that neither Maidstone nor Malling fits the picture perfectly whether we take Birling Place or Cob Tree Hall as Manor Farm, and it may have been for this reason that Dickens gave the place a fictitious name. But the visual sense was so strong in him, and so essential in writing, that he probably had either the one or the other in mind, and my own guess is that it was West Malling, which in any case has changed less than Maidstone, so is more in character today. It may be said, of course, that the Muggleton of *Pickwick Papers* is simply a typical country town, with market square and coaching inn, which in this case was a Blue Lion, with shops of the kind to be found in every small town, and with the usual red-brick Georgian houses occupied by the attorney and the doctor. So it is; but in addition we are given two more or less precise bits of information about Muggleton which ought to help with the identification. The trouble is that as one of these applies

to Malling, the other to Maidstone, they only confuse the issue. Muggleton, we learn, was a famous place for cricket. This was West Malling's distinction. On the other hand, Muggleton was a corporate town, which West Malling was not and Maidstone was. In his annotated Jubilee edition of his father's works, Charles Dickens the younger introduced a woodcut of the dignified and pleasant High Street of West Malling, or Town Malling, as it was sometimes called, and this note: 'Muggleton, perhaps, is only to be taken as a fancy sketch of a small country town; but it is generally supposed, and probably with sufficient accuracy, that, if it is in any degree a portrait of any Kentish town, Town Malling, a great place for cricket in Mr. Pickwick's time, sat for it.' If West Malling was in fact Muggleton, the Bear Hotel must have been the Blue Lion. This distinction has been claimed for the Swan; but Mr. Rust of Birling established that the Bear, which is in the Market Place, was the only inn at Malling with a room large enough for the Cricket Club dinner.

Of the characteristics which some believe swing the balance decisively in favour of Maidstone we are told: 'Muggleton is a corporate town, with a mayor, burgesses, and freemen; and anybody who has consulted the addresses of the mayor to the freemen, or the freemen to the mayor, or both to the corporation, or all three to Parliament, will learn from thence what they ought to have known before, that Muggleton is an ancient and loyal borough, mingling a zealous advocacy of Christian principles with a devoted attachment to commercial rights; in demonstration whereof, the mayor, corporation, and other inhabitants have presented at divers times, no fewer than one thousand four hundred and twenty petitions against the continuance of negro slavery abroad, and an equal number against any interference with the factory system at home; sixty-eight in favour of the sale of livings in the Church, and eighty-six for abolishing Sunday trading in the street.' A third claimant is Gravesend, for which it is argued that as the description in *Pickwick Papers* is sarcastic, and Dickens is known to

have disliked the town, this is a likely subject for such an attack.

There it is, and readers may feel that it doesn't matter much which he had in mind. What matters is that both Muggleton and Dingley are so real in *Pickwick*. And we must not forget that in Chapter Twenty-eight there was a second visit to Dingley Dell, for which Mr. Pickwick and his three friends, wrapped 'in great coats, shawls and comforters', travelled from London on the 'Muggleton Telegraph' coach to enjoy the dancing, blind-man's-buff and kissing under the mistletoe of Christmas at Dingley Dell and the nuptials of Bella Wardle and Mr. Trundle, because this was the first of the many jocund scenes of Christmas revelry which were to provide the golden key by which Dickens, the magician, was to unlock the door to all those treasures of humour and kindness that will enrich mankind for ever, and bring back Dickens to every English hearth whenever the bells ring out for Christmas.

The setting of this first Dickensian Christmas was here at Dingley Dell, in an English yeoman's home, and where better? 'The best sitting-room at Manor Farm,' we are told, 'was a good, long, dark-panelled room with a high chimney-piece, and a capacious chimney, up which you could have driven one of the new patent cabs, wheels and all. At the upper end of the room, seated in a shady bower of holly and evergreens, were the two best fiddlers, and the only harp in all Muggleton. In all sorts of recesses, and on all kinds of brackets, stood massive old silver candlesticks, with four branches each. The carpet was up, the candles burnt bright, the fire blazed and crackled on the hearth; and merry voices and light-hearted laughter rang through the room. If any of the old English yeomen had turned into fairies when they died, it was just the place in which they would have held their revels.'

As Dickens wrote the chapters on Dingley Dell and Muggleton either during or immediately after his honeymoon at Chalk it seems probable that he made his excursion into this part of Kent by way of Shorne, Cobham, and

Snodland, which in those days of slow transport would be the more attractive route than the main road through Rochester and over Blue Bell Hill. If this is so, it is more than likely that the Pickwickians followed the same route, and this theory is supported by the information that Mr. Winkle's horse went 'drifting up the High Street', preceded by the chaise. And by 'up' he must surely mean in the direction of London. If the party did in fact start in that direction, they would take the West Malling road after crossing the river. Undoubtedly Dickens himself would be more familiar at this time with the countryside west of the Medway than with that to the east. But the best evidence for this particular theory is in *My Father As I Recall Him*, where Maimie Dickens tells us that once when she drove with her father along 'the beautiful back road' from Rochester to Cobham, he showed her the exact spot where Mr. Pickwick called out: 'Whoa! I have dropped my whip.' This route would also account for the distance being given as fifteen miles.

There are other incidental references to this part of Kent in *Pickwick Papers*, as well as the never to be forgotten visit to the Leather Bottle at Cobham. Shorne churchyard, for example, is mentioned in the story of the 'Queer Client' as the last resting-place of Heyling's wife and child. And here, incidentally, Dickens again shows that romantic attachment to churchyards first disclosed in those childhood reveries at the house on the Brook. The Churchyard at Shorne, we learn, was 'one of the most peaceful and secluded churchyards in Kent, where wild-flowers mingle with the grass, and the soft landscape around forms the fairest spot in the garden of England'. It is said that at one time Dickens himself wished to be buried here.

After climbing the hill from Chalk, Dickens would take his young wife through Shorne to the Strood to Cobham road, which they would cross, and walk through Cobham Park, seat of the Earls of Darnley, with a circumference of seven miles and an area of six hundred and fifty acres, and eventually come out at Cobham village, with its typical

village hostelry, The Leather Bottle. The whole excursion must have been entrancing to Charles and Katherine Dickens, who, we may be sure, were no different in all that mattered from other honeymoon couples. So when Mr. Pickwick and his two remaining companions, Winkle and Snodgrass, received an alarming missive from the love-lorn Tracy Tupman, who had fled from Dingley Dell on discovering that Rachael Wardle was faithless, Dickens brings them to Cobham. Tupman, we may remember, had left a letter with the ostler at the Crown at Muggleton, to be forwarded to Mr. Pickwick at Manor Farm, which stated that 'any letter addressed to me at the Leather Bottle, Cobham, Kent, will be forwarded—supposing I still exist'. Mr. Pickwick feared the worst for his friend, but as he and his companions journeyed by coach to Rochester, 'the violence of their grief had sufficiently abated to admit of their making a very excellent early dinner'. Having thus regaled themselves, they set out for Cobham, and we have that lyrical description:

'A delightful walk it was; for it was a pleasant afternoon in June, and their way lay through a deep and shady wood, cooled by the light wind which gently rustled the thick foliage, and enlivened by the songs of the birds that perched upon the boughs. The ivy and moss crept in thick clusters over the old trees, and the soft green turf overspread the ground like a silken mat. They emerged upon an open park, with an ancient hall, displaying the quaint and picturesque architecture of Elizabeth's time. Long vistas of stately oaks and elm trees appeared on every side; large herds of deer were cropping the fresh grass; and occasionally a startled hare scoured along the ground, with the speed of the shadows thrown by the light clouds which swept across a sunny landscape like a passing breath of summer.'

And so they came to the Leather Bottle, 'a clean and commodious village ale-house', where they found their friend Tupman 'looking as unlike a man who had taken leave of this world as possible'. Indeed, on reaching Cobham, Mr. Pickwick had remarked that: 'If this were the place to

which all who are troubled with our friend's complaint came, I fancy their old attachment to this world would very soon return,' and had later exclaimed, 'really for a misanthrope's choice, this is one of the prettiest and most desirable places of residence I ever met with'. Mr. Tupman himself was not too downcast to appreciate the inn, whatever his reactions may have been to the village. When the three Pickwickians were shown into the parlour—a long, low-roofed room furnished with a large number of high-backed leather-cushioned chairs, of fantastic shapes, and embellished with a great variety of old portraits and roughly-coloured prints of some antiquity—they found their lost companion in the comfortable state that follows a hearty dinner of 'roast fowl, bacon, ale, and etceteras'.

Mr. Pickwick promptly invited Tupman to take a walk with him, so that they might discuss the situation privately, and the two of them crossed the road to the churchyard, where for half an hour 'their forms might have been seen pacing the churchyard to and fro, while Mr. Pickwick was engaged in combating his companion's resolution'. And then it was that Mr. Pickwick made the discovery that has been an embarrassment to all good antiquaries ever since. Having passed the door of the alehouse, and walked a little way down the village street, Mr. Pickwick's eye fell upon a small broken stone, partially buried in the ground, in front of a cottage door. He paused.

"This is very strange," said Mr. Pickwick.

"What is strange?" inquired Mr. Tupman, staring eagerly at every object near him, but the right one. "God bless me, what's the matter?"

"This last was an ejaculation of irrepressible astonishment, occasioned by seeing Mr. Pickwick, in his enthusiasm for discovery, fall upon his knees before the little stone, and commence wiping the dust off it with his pocket-handkerchief.

"There is an inscription here," said Mr. Pickwick. . . . "This is some very old inscription, existing perhaps long before the ancient alms-houses in this place. It must not be lost."

We know the rest of the story. How all the Pickwickians set to work washing and scraping, and how they finally deciphered the mystic letter which caused Mr. Pickwick's eyes to sparkle with delight in the belief that he had attained one of his ambitions. But alas, there is no sanctity about the good name of any antiquary, and Mr. Pickwick was followed into Kent by 'the presumptuous and ill-conditioned Blotton':

'Mr. Blotton, with a mean desire to tarnish the lustre of the immortal name of Pickwick, actually undertook a journey to Cobham in person, and on his return, sarcastically observed in an oration at the club, that he had seen the man from whom the stone was purchased; that the man presumed the stone to be ancient; but solemnly denied the antiquity of the inscription—inasmuch as he represented it to have been rudely carved by himself in an idle mood, and to display letters intended to bear neither more nor less than the simple construction of—"BILL STUMPS, HIS MARK."'

Dickens, Maclise, and Forster spent two days at Cobham in 1840, putting up, no doubt, at the Leather Bottle, which is still a place of happy memories for all Dickensians, and has a 'Bill Stumps' stone reared against it. Its walls are covered with Dickens mementoes—photographs, old prints, newspaper cuttings and Dickensian keepsakes of every description, so that although it was partly destroyed by fire on Good Friday, 1887, and has been enlarged, it is still to all intents and purposes the Leather Bottle of Pickwick, with a parlour reminiscent of the sentimental Tupman, and upstairs the identical bedroom, overlooking the churchyard, in which Mr. Pickwick sat up into the small and ghostly hours perusing the old clergyman's manuscript, by which means his restless mind and over-excited body were finally brought into a proper condition for sleep.

CHAPTER VII

KENT, THE CHOSEN COUNTY

KENT had a special place in the heart of Charles Dickens. It was the one county for which he had a regional attachment that might be called love. It suited him. As early as 1840, when he was twenty-eight, he could say: 'I have many happy recollections connected with Kent, and am scarcely less interested in it than if I had been a Kentish man bred and born, and had resided in the county all my life.' Its orchards, cornfields, and country towns brought him contentment; its marshes put a spell on him; its breezy downs and raggle-taggle copses appealed to him in vagrant moods, and its coast could always restore him to vigour when his spirit flagged. So Kent was to be his chosen summer resort during the best years of his life, and finally his home.

From the Pickwick country of Cobham and Muggleton we may turn to Cooling and the marshes so tellingly described in *Great Expectations*. Cooling, indeed, is to *Great Expectations* what Cobham is to *Pickwick Papers*, at least so far as Kent is concerned. That, at all events, is the view of orthodox Dickensians, although two of the master's most devoted disciples, Colonel W. Laurence Gadd¹ and Mr. Edwin Harris,² thought differently. That Dickens himself said he had Cooling in mind in describing Pip's village didn't count, apparently. Certain discrepancies were discovered and Cooling was dismissed.

As Dickens was writing fiction, not topography, it is surely absurd that he should be regarded as being on oath in every statement he makes. In fact, the greater number of his portraits are composite. It is in the selection and grouping of significant features that he shows his art.

¹ *Great Expectations Country*.

² *The Hundred of Hoo and its Dickens Associations*.

Nevertheless his descriptions are so realistic that enthusiasts, jealous of the great man's honour, have gone to no end of trouble to explain away apparent inconsistencies. They simply cannot believe that places they have known all their lives were not as actual as the houses they were born in. It is not surprising, therefore, that in spite of what the Dickens family said about Cooling being Pip's village, Colonel Gadd maintained that it was Lower Higham and Mr. Edwin Harris was equally certain that it was Hoo St. Werburgh.

Before we look at these claims it might be useful to consider what Dickens himself said. Forster says that Dickens took him to Cooling, and in its lonely churchyard told him that he intended to make this the scene of his new novel. 'It is strange,' he writes, 'as I transcribe the words, with what wonderful vividness they bring back the very spot on which we stood when he said he meant to make it the scene of the opening of his story—Cooling Castle ruins and the desolate church, lying out among the marshes seven miles from Gad's Hill!' Dolby, in *Charles Dickens as I Knew Him*, tells us that during a visit to Dickens in 1869 he was taken to the same spot: 'Many a misty walk we took,' he says, 'to the marshes at Cooling that we might get a realistic notion of the dreariness and loneliness of the scenes in *Great Expectations*, made famous by Pip and the convict.' As for the family, Charles Dickens the younger, the novelist's son, writing in the *Pall Mall Magazine* in 1896, said: 'If there is one thing on which the professors of Dickens topography are agreed, it is that the village of Cooling on the Thames and Medway marshes is the actual village in which Pip and the Gargerys lived.'

Here and only here are the 'little stone lozenges' in the churchyard, 'each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat row behind the grave, and were sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine [Pip's]—who gave up trying to get a living exceedingly early in that universal struggle'. So narrow were their stones that Pip believed 'they had all been born with their hands in

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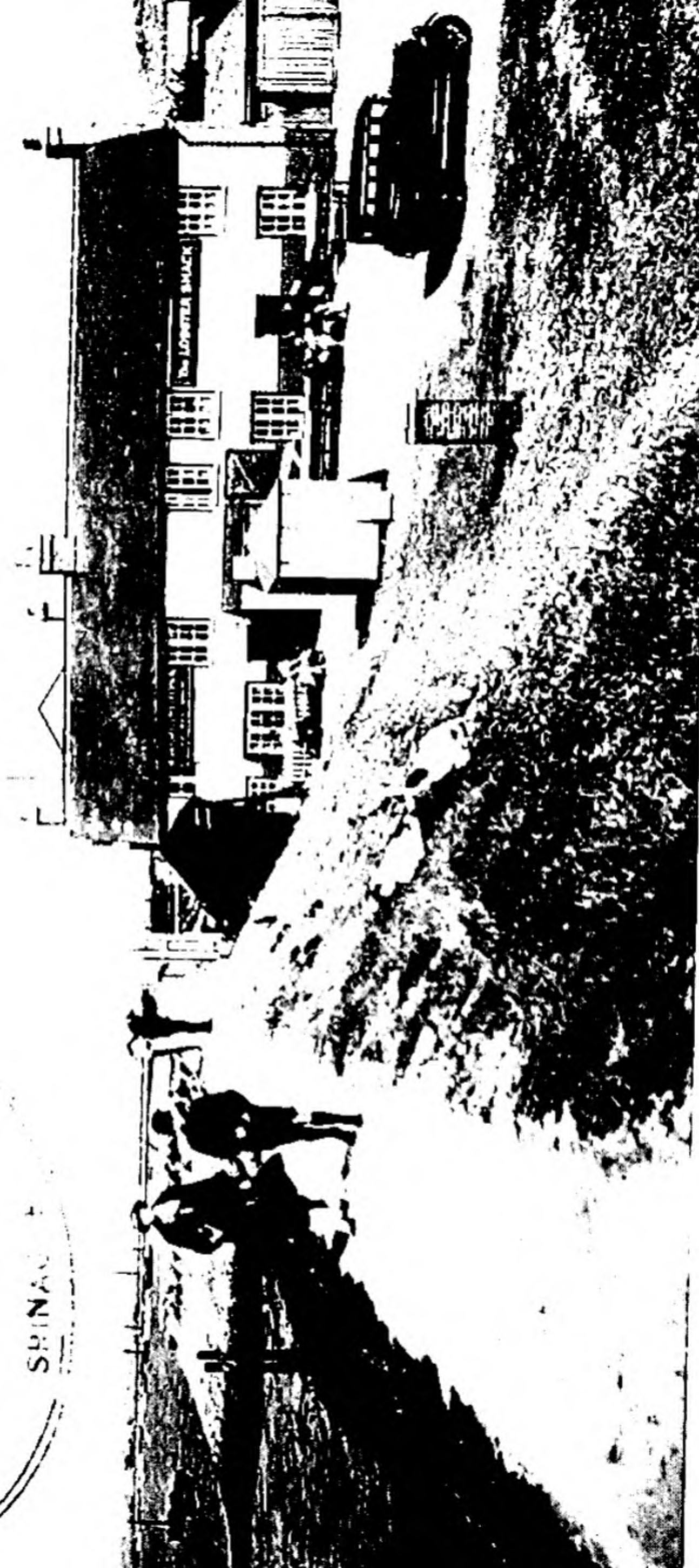


Photo by Valentine, Dundee

THE LOBSTER SMACK, CANVEY ISLAND



Commercial Studios, Ipswich

MR. PICKWICK'S BEDROOM, THE GREAT WHITE HORSE, IPSWICH

their trousers-pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence'. The stones were accepted by everyone. There could be no argument about those. But what about the forge? For a time there were grave doubts about this. At last, however, the Reverend Henry Smetham, author of *Rambles Round Churches in Dickensland*, hunted through all the old title deeds to Cooling properties and established that a forge, or house named The Forge, had formerly adjoined the churchyard. Mr. Smetham also pointed out that the description of the view from the churchyard in *Great Expectations* fitted Cooling, and none of the other villages claimed as prototypes. Here only could be seen across the marshes the low leaden line of the river, and the distant savage lair of the sea.

So far so good. But Mr. Harris had at least one trump card, and the colonel might be thought to have several. Mr. Harris pointed out that in the description of the convict-hunt this sentence occurs: 'Presently we saw other torches kindled at some distance behind us, and others on the marshes on the opposite bank of the river.' As sleet was falling at the time, Mr. Harris argued, it would have been quite impossible for a search-party to see across the Thames from the Cooling Marshes; but if they had been in the vicinity of his village, Hoo St. Werburgh, torches would have been clearly visible across the Medway.

Colonel Gadd's village was Lower Higham, two or three miles to the west of Cooling, which, he argued, was the only one in the hundred with a church that fulfilled the essential condition of having 'a desolate church lying out among the marshes', a mile or more from the village. Cooling Church is at the heart of the village and about half a mile inland from the marshes. This, claimed the colonel, ruled it out at once, stones or no stones, because in Chapter V Pip says: 'We struck out on the open marshes through the gate at the side of the churchyard—a bitter sleet came rattling against us here on the east wind.' Moreover Lower Higham had a beacon, which stood on the edge of the marsh at the precise point required by the story, and was correctly

placed in relation to the battery mound, which occupied the site on which General Gordon built Cliffe Fort in 1869-70, ten years after Dickens wrote *Great Expectations*, and indeed in the last year of Dickens's life. This beacon at Cliffe was one of the old elevated iron-cage type, which could be packed with inflammable material and used as flares. Later they served as navigation marks. The Cliffe beacon was, in fact, the successor to one of the two erected by Richard II about 1377—the first two beacons on the estuary. Dickens described the Cliffe Creek beacon as 'an ugly thing when you were near it, like an unhooped cask on a pole'.¹ The mound referred to was one of the bulwarks erected by Henry VIII for the defence of the estuary in 1539. It was here, it will be remembered, that Pip and Joe Gargery pursued their studies. This mound was to the east of the church at Lower Higham, whereas at Cooling it was to the west, and therefore in the wrong position for the novel.

The colonel undoubtedly knew his topography. He was as expert in the lay-out of the parishes as Mr. Smetham was in their records, and when members of the Cooling school pointed out to him that Dickens himself had said that he had Cooling in mind he merely answered that evidently Dickens had changed his mind. It is only fair, however, to add that he did acknowledge that Dickens's portraits were composite and not photographic. But whatever their father had done, the family of Charles Dickens had no intention of changing their minds. When Colonel Gadd's opinions were brought to the notice of Sir Henry Fielding Dickens, the novelist's sixth son, he wrote to *The Dickensian*:²

'Colonel Gadd is altogether wrong in placing Lower Higham as the scene. . . . The scene is laid at Cooling Castle and the church is Cooling Church—Lower Higham is quite out of the question. I know this for an absolute fact, having often walked through all that marsh country with my father and we have together looked down upon the little gravestones in Cooling churchyard.'

¹ *The Dickensian*, XXII, 110.

² January, 1925.

What, in view of all this confusion, was Cineguild Ltd. to do when *Great Expectations* was filmed? An impartial examiner of the evidence might have allowed several claims to part of the property, if none to the whole. The quaint gravestones were undoubtedly from Cooling. He would have no difficulty in disposing of those. The battery he would find was from Cliffe; the prison steps from Egypt Bay, and so forth. In most of his findings he would carry the colonel with him; but the church, the churchyard, and the marshes, would remain in doubt. What in fact did the film directors do? They evaded the issue entirely by erecting both church and churchyard in the studios at Denham! Then, in order to get the atmosphere right, they set up on St. Mary's Marshes a house as nearly as possible like that in which Joe Gargery and his wife were supposed to live when Pip joined them. The convict scenes were shot, not off Cooling, but on the mudbank near Colemouth Creek off the Isle of Grain. The result of this clever and entirely Dickensian compromise was an admirable production. No one could have wished for a better representation of the marsh country; but why did the church lack a spire?

At the time when Dickens wrote *Great Expectations*, the Hulks—the 'Wicked Noah's Ark'—was on Cooling Marsh, but had been converted into a coastguard station. He was, however, familiar with these prison ships in the Thames. In his boyhood at Chatham he would frequently see the three of them that lay off Upnor Castle.

So much, then, for the marshes of *Great Expectations*. He was to love the county all his life, and to know it so well that nothing could be easier for him as he sat in his study than to take one feature here and another there until he got exactly the effect he wanted for the mood and plot of his story.

The two contrasting aspects of Kent already noted, the composed and settled aspect of the inland scene, so often referred to as the Garden of England, and the tang of its blown, invigorating coast, was to be life itself to Dickens. These male and female counterparts, as it were, of the

county, can be seen by looking at Canterbury for the one part and Broadstairs for the other. So let us look at Canterbury as Dickens sees it. It was the perfect example for his purpose of the old cathedral towns he loved so much, and that it was in his chosen county of Kent enhanced its charm a hundredfold. *David Copperfield* is our book here. We remember how David reached the city in the course of his wearisome tramp from London to Dover, and how he passed through 'the sunny streets . . . dozing as it were in the hot light . . . its old houses and gateways, and the stately grey cathedral, with the rooks sailing round the towers'. And how he returned to school here, but first had to visit Mr. Wickfield, his aunt's lawyer, at a house near the West Gate, which is said to have been at 71 St. Dunstan's Street.

'At length we stopped before a very old house bulging out over the road; a house with long low lattice-windows bulging out still farther, and beams with carved heads on the ends bulging out too, so that I fancied the whole house was leaning forward, trying to see who was passing on the narrow pavement below. It was quite spotless in its cleanliness. The old-fashioned brass knocker on the low arched door, ornamented with carved garlands of fruit and flowers, twinkled like a star; the two stone steps descending to the door were as white as if they had been covered with fair linen; and all the angles and corners, and carvings and mouldings, and quaint little panes of glass, and quainter little windows, though as old as the hills, were as pure as any snow that ever fell upon the hills.' It was here that he became acquainted with Agnes and Uriah Heep.

The school he attended—Dr. Strong's—was drawn from the King's School, or so it appears, although again it was typical of its kind: 'A grave building in a courtyard, with a learned air about it that seemed well suited to the stray rooks and jackdaws who came down from the cathedral towers to walk with a clerkly bearing on the grass plot.' In an old secluded garden at the side of the doctor's house, which is said to have been 1 Lady Wootton's Green, a house

which resembles Gad's Hill Place, the peaches ripened against the sunny south wall, and everywhere there was the kind of gravity and quiet security that one associates with an ancient foundation in cathedral precincts.

From Dr. Strong's school David went regularly to the cathedral, with its venerable towers, 'and the old jackdaws and rooks whose airy voices made them more retired than perfect silence would have done; the battered gateways, once stuck full of statues, long thrown down and crumbled away, like the reverential pilgrims who had gazed upon them: the still rooks, where the ivied growths of centuries crept over gabled ends and ruined walls: the ancient houses, the pastoral landscape of field, orchard and garden; everywhere, on everything—I felt the same serene air, the same calm, thoughtful, softening spirit'.

Dickens being the man he was, the picture could not be complete without an old-fashioned inn for at least one of the scenes, and there it was in the sixteenth-century Sun, formerly the Little Inn, close to the cathedral in Sun Street. It was here that Mr. Micawber put up, occupying a little room 'partitioned off from the commercial room, and strongly flavoured with tobacco smoke. I think it was over the kitchen, because a warm, greasy smell appeared to come up through the chinks in the floor, and there was a flabby perspiration on the walls. I know it was near the bar, on account of the smell of spirits and jingling of glasses'.

It was small wonder that David, like Dickens, should have returned to these quiet streets that always restored him to serenity. In Chapter LII he records what was probably David's last visit:

'Early in the morning, I sauntered through the dear old tranquil streets, and again mingled with the shadows of the venerable gateways and churches. The rooks were sailing about the cathedral towers; and the towers themselves, overlooking many a long unaltered mile of the rich country and its pleasant streams, were cutting the bright morning air, as if there were no such things as change on earth.'

Most of Dickens's personal visits to Canterbury were

from Broadstairs, and his port of call was probably the Fountain in St. Margaret's Street, the County inn where Mr. Dick slept when he visited David at Dr. Strong's school every alternate Wednesday. Poor Mr. Dick! Any debts he contracted here were referred to Miss Trotwood, so that, as David put it, 'Mr. Dick was only allowed to rattle his money, and not to spend it'. Mr. Dick, we remember, like all the best people in Dickens, was fond of his food. His particular partiality was for ginger-bread, which Miss Betsey Trotwood allowed him to obtain on credit at a cake-shop in Canterbury, with the stipulation that he should never have more than a shillingworth in the course of a single day. But the food at the County, which was destroyed by enemy action during the Second World War, cannot have surpassed that at the Sun, where Mrs. Micawber entertained David to 'a beautiful little dinner'—'quite an elegant dish of fish; the kidney end of a loin of veal roasted; fried sausage meat; a partridge and a pudding. There was wine, and there was strong ale; and after dinner Mrs. Micawber made us a bowl of hot punch with her own hands.' When David saw this house for the last time from the corner of the street, 'the early sun was striking edgewise on its gables and lattice-windows, touching them with gold; and', he adds, 'some beams of its old peace seemed to touch my heart'.

Canterbury, he divined, required a different mood from any that seemed appropriate for Rochester. Both were cathedral cities, but there was less bluster and activity about Canterbury. The coaches did not rattle through Canterbury as they did through Rochester. The latter was dominated by a castle, which still guarded a vital road and river, the former in those days could dream away its life in retirement and tranquillity. No one threatened it. At its heart was the cathedral and its precincts, untroubled by the fretful stir of life outside.

In such a setting it was obvious that there must be an affair of the heart, but one in which there should be more of tenderness than of passion. And for this we have David returning to Canterbury to propose to Agnes Wickfield,

traversing the well-remembered ground, where every stone, he says, was a boy's book to him.

How different was Broadstairs! At one time it had been a fashionable resort, but when Dickens first visited Broadstairs in 1837 it had lapsed into obscurity again, and was simply a quiet fishing village under the breezy headland between Margate and Ramsgate, known only to the few who valued it for its seclusion and bracing air. For years there was no place like it for Dickens. Much as he liked bustle and excitement in his everyday life, he preferred to relax where he and his friends could have a beach to themselves. Broadstairs as it was in 1837 was ideal, and he returned every summer until 1851, with the two exceptions of 1844, which he spent in Italy, and 1846, which he spent at Lausanne. From about 1842, however, its attractions steadily waned as it again found favour with the rapidly increasing popularity of sea-bathing.

The Macreadys and Salas were often there at the same time. Such families would take either houses or rooms for most of August and September, and go on bathing expeditions or sightseeing excursions together. They were carefree days. Dickens was only twenty-five in 1837. There are stories of him and his friends railing off part of the pier and dancing a quadrille in the gathering dusk, of his carrying off one of the girls to the end of the jetty and threatening to hold her there until the waves came up and drowned them both clasped in each other's arms. In short, they did most of the things young people do for a few short years and laugh about for the rest of their lives.

In 1837 the Dickenses stayed at 12, afterwards 31, High Street, a modest house with a small parlour, which has been rebuilt. In 1839 they stayed at 40 Albion Street, later incorporated with the Albion Hotel, where he wrote the concluding chapters of *Nicholas Nickleby*, and dedicated the book to his holiday neighbour Macready. There were numerous visits to the Albion Hotel, where a letter is still displayed on one of the walls commending the delights of Broadstairs: 'A good sea-fresh breeze—fine sands—and

pleasant walks—with all manner of fishing-boats, light-houses, piers, bathing-machines, are its only attractions; but it is one of the freshest and freest little places in the world.' At Lawn House, rented in 1840 and 1841, parts of *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge* were written. Others of the novels were worked at steadily during the summer months of these many succeeding years at Broadstairs; but the one book of which no part was written there is the one so stupidly associated with the place—*Bleak House*. Why on earth this gaunt, pseudo-Gothic structure on the cliff, originally called Fort House, should have been given that misleading name nobody knows. It has associations, and very real ones, in that the house which it replaced was occupied by Dickens as a summer resort for several years, and coveted for many more. Lawn House was taken because he had tried and failed to get Fort House. But in July 1850 Fort House at last came into his hands, and that summer he completed *David Copperfield* there.

The following year, 1851, was the year of the Great Exhibition, so Dickens let his town house in Devonshire Terrace from May to November, and spent the whole of that summer and autumn at Broadstairs. At that time only a cornfield lay between Fort House and the sea, and he would lie in bed in the early morning, watching the sun climb the heavens and listening to the waves breaking against the cliffs. He was nearly forty and at the height of his powers. His position was now assured. For a few months he relaxed and enjoyed himself. Indeed, the summer of 1851 must have been one of the happiest he was ever to know. In June he could write as though Broadstairs was a new discovery, and himself a young man: 'It is more delightful here than I can express. Corn growing, larks singing, garden full of flowers, fresh air on the sea. Oh, it is wonderful!' Surely no man ever got more pleasure out of the simple animal satisfaction of being alive than Dickens did at this time of his life, and nowhere was he happier than at Broadstairs. In 1849 he tried the Isle of Wight; but the air was too relaxing, and in September he was back at Broad-

stairs. No other place could tone up his system so quickly, and enable him to write in such strains as: 'It is the brightest day you ever saw. The sun is sparkling on the water so that I can hardly bear to look at it. The tide is in, and the fishing-boats are dancing like mad. Upon the green-topped cliffs the corn is cut and piled in stacks, and thousands of butterflies are flitting about.' He would sit at his open window writing until the invitation of the sea became too strong for him to resist, then dash off for a bathe or fourteen- to twenty-mile walk, or, if the weather was too hot for strenuous exercise, lie on his back in the sand, reading.

Descriptions of Broadstairs in all its moods are to be found scattered throughout his writings, but nowhere more vividly than in the letters. In one we find him writing of the time when he and Forster spent such a merry night together in the house two doors from the Albion. In another we have him touching off a typical mood and adventure: 'It has been blowing great guns for the last three days, and last night there was such a sea. I staggered down to the pier, and, creeping under the lee of a large boat, which was high and dry, watched it breaking for an hour. Of course I came back wet through.'

Many scenes in the novels that were given a different location were really sketched and visualized at Broadstairs. It was from his experiences of storms off the North Foreland that he was able to write so vividly about Steerforth's drowning at Yarmouth. The prototype of Betsey Trotwood was a Broadstairs old lady named Miss Strong, who lived in what is now 'Dickens House', in the middle of Nuckell's Place on the sea front, and who had an idiosyncrasy for driving back the donkeys that approached what she regarded as her private bit of cliff, no matter who was in charge of them. Donkey-chaises were a feature of Broadstairs in those days. 'Whenever you come here,' wrote Dickens, 'and see harnessed donkeys eating clover out of barrows drawn completely across a narrow thoroughfare, you may be quite sure you are in our High Street.' Betsey Trotwood's house is lovingly preserved by Miss Gladys Waterer, to whom the

present writer is much indebted for information about Dickensian Broadstairs.

One morning in 1851, perhaps with the idea that Broadstairs and he must part soon, Dickens described the scene for *Household Words*, where it appeared as a sketch entitled *Our Watering Place*: 'Half awake and half asleep, this idle morning in our sunny window on the edge of the chalk-cliff in the old-fashioned watering-place to which we are a faithful resorter, we feel a lazy inclination to sketch its picture. The place seems to respond. Sky, sea, beach, and village lie as still before us as if they were sitting for the picture. It is dead low-water. A ripple plays among the ripening corn upon the cliff, as if it were faintly trying from recollection to imitate the sea; and the world of butterflies hovering over the crop of radish seed are as restless in their little way as the gulls are in their larger manner when the wind blows. But the ocean lies winking in the sunlight like a drowsy lion—its glassy waters scarcely curve upon the shore—the fishing-boats in the tiny harbour are all stranded in the mud—but two colliers (our watering-place has a maritime trade employing that amount of shipping) have not an inch of water within a quarter of a mile of them, and turn, exhausted on their sides, like faint fish of an antediluvian species. Rusty cables and chains, ropes and rings, undermost parts of posts and piles, and confused timber-defences against the waves, lie strewn about in a brown litter of tangled seaweed and fallen cliff, which looks as if a family of giants had been making tea here for ages, and had observed an untidy custom of throwing their tea-leaves on the shore.'

He was never again to spend a long summer holiday at Broadstairs; the place had been spoiled for him. But in 1859, after an exhausting reading tour, he wrote to Forster that he felt that nothing but the sea would restore him, and as there was still no sea for him like the sea that broke against the cliffs at Broadstairs, he again went down to stay at the Albion for a week. Whereas, however, in the old days he had travelled from London Bridge by boat, which

itself had been an additional pleasure, now the journey was by train.

But if the railway spoiled Broadstairs for Dickens it enlarged his field of operation, and introduced its own pleasures. The novel in which he describes the effect of the railway most effectively is *Dombey and Son*, published in parts between October 1846 and April 1848. In it Dombey's villainous manager, James Carker, after his elopement with the unhappy wife, Edith, is pursued and cornered on a railway station, where he falls in front of a train and comes to a deserved but bloody end. The name of the station is not mentioned, but it was evidently on the South-Eastern Railway between Dover and London, a line Dickens came to know particularly well. Mr. Carker was on his way home from the Continent, and apparently planned to give his pursuer the slip by getting off at Paddock Wood and taking the recently opened branch line to Maidstone. It is, perhaps, significant that a railway station seemed at this time the appropriate place for such a horrifying scene.

It was the South-Eastern that enabled Dickens to spend the summer of 1853 at Dover instead of Broadstairs, and gave him a new scene for his novels, although the old picture was still so clear in his mind that he transplanted lock, stock, and barrel, 'that very neat little cottage with cheerful bow windows in front of it, a small square gravelled court or garden full of flowers carefully tended, and smelling deliciously', and its benevolent owner, Miss Betsey Trotwood. The difficulty David had in finding his aunt's cottage was probably a reflection of Dickens's own difficulty in finding his way about in Dover when he visited it first. But during the three months he spent at 10 Camden Crescent in 1852 we may be sure that he explored every street and byway, as well as the country inland. So, when he came to write *A Tale of Two Cities*, he was able to make Dover the place where Mr. Lorry disclosed to Miss Manette that her father had been recalled to life. Their inn was the George, which was probably the old Ship, now demolished, a fine old house where the custom of giving rooms names instead

of numbers was still observed, so that such orders might be given as: 'Gentleman's valise and hot water to Concord.' After breakfast, Mr. Lorry strolled on the beach; and took in the scene:

'The little narrow, crooked town of Dover hid itself away from the beach, and ran its head into the chalk cliffs, like a marine ostrich. The beach was a desert of heaps of sea and stones tumbling wildly about, and the sea did what it liked, and what it liked was destruction. It thundered at the town, and thundered at the cliffs, and brought the coast down, madly. The air among the houses was of so strong a piscatory flavour that one might have supposed sick fish went up to be dipped in it, as sick people went down to be dipped in the sea. A little fishing was done in the port, and a quantity of strolling about by night, and looking seaward; particularly at those times when the tide made, and was near flood. Small tradesmen, who did no business whatever, sometimes unaccountably realized large fortunes, and it was remarkable that nobody in the neighbourhood could endure a lamplighter.' In 1855 he took apartments at the Lord Warden Hotel, where he was on particularly friendly terms with the manager and his wife.

Dover's neighbour, Folkestone, was yet another Kentish resort which Dickens found conducive to inspiration because it engendered in him what is always the most important element in inspiration—energy. It was what Charles Lamb called 'the kindly engendure' of *Little Dorrit*, and the place that inspired that droll account of the launching of a fishing-boat. Of his life at Folkestone Dickens wrote: 'How I work, how I walk, how I shut myself up, how I roll down hills and climb up cliffs; how the new story is everywhere, heaving in the sea, flying with the clouds, blowing in the wind; how I settle to nothing and wonder (in the old way) at my own incomprehensibility.' In those days the Pavilion Hotel, where he stayed, was a rambling brick building lying close to the cliff, which, although a modest house, was known to everyone because everyone had to pass it on the way either to or from the boats. Behind was the kind of rolling chal-

lenging country that appealed to such a walker as himself — 'heights and downs and country roads, and I don't know what, everywhere.' So, in the summer of 1855, he took 3 Albion Villas, and brought his family down to what he described as 'a very pleasant little house overlooking the sea'.

In Dickens Folkestone becomes Pavilionstone, in honour of the Pavilion Hotel, but the only accounts of the town worth noting are in *Reprinted Pieces*, where we have his account of the pleasures of being *Out of Town* on a bright September morning, sitting among his books and papers at an open window overlooking the sea, which was written from 3 Albion Villas for the number of *Household Words* published on 29 September, 1855. But one thing happened at Folkestone which altered the course of his life, and hastened his premature death. It was here that he started the public readings which were to consume so much of his time and energy for the rest of his life. They began with a decision to give a public reading at Folkestone in aid of local institutes. This was so successful that he decided to follow it up with similar readings for his own benefit in other towns. Writing of this first reading to Forster on 16 September, 1855, he says: 'I am going to read for them here on the 5th of next month, and have answered in the last fortnight thirty applications to do the like all over England, Ireland, and Scotland.' And a week later: 'I am going to read here next Friday week. There are (as there are everywhere) a Literary Institution and a Working Men's Institution, which have not the slightest sympathy or connection. The stalls are five shillings, and I have made them fix the working men's admission at three pence, and I hope it may bring them together. The event comes off in a carpenter's shop, as the biggest place that can be got.' The carpenter's shop, we learn, was a builder's saw-mill in the Dover Road, subsequently the site of the fire station.

Esther Summerson in *Bleak House* visits Deal, travelling with the mail until, she says, 'At last we came into the narrow streets of Deal, and very gloomy they were upon a

raw, misty morning. The long, flat beach, with its little irregular houses, wooden and brick, and its litter of capstans, and great boats and sheds, and bare upright poles with tackle and blocks, and loose gravelly waste places overgrown with grass and weeds, were as dull in appearance as any place I ever saw. The sea was heaving under a thick white fog; and nothing else was moving but a few early ropemakers, who with the yarn twisted round their bodies, looked as if, tired of their present state of existence, they were spinning themselves into cordage.' But in the warm room of a comfortable hotel they were soon able to think of the town more cheerfully.

Most of the other watering-places of Kent come in for casual reference. Ramsgate and Margate are mentioned occasionally in letters and in *Sketches by Boz*, where we hear about 'The Tuggses at Ramsgate'. Herne Bay seems to be the most neglected among the Thanet resorts. So far as I can discover there is no record that he was ever there, although he does mention the place in a letter to Douglas Jerrold in June 1843, only however, to scout the idea of a proposed visit: 'Herne Bay. Hum. I suppose it's no worse than any other place in this weather, but it is watery rather —isn't it?'

CHAPTER VIII

WITH DICKENS IN EAST ANGLIA

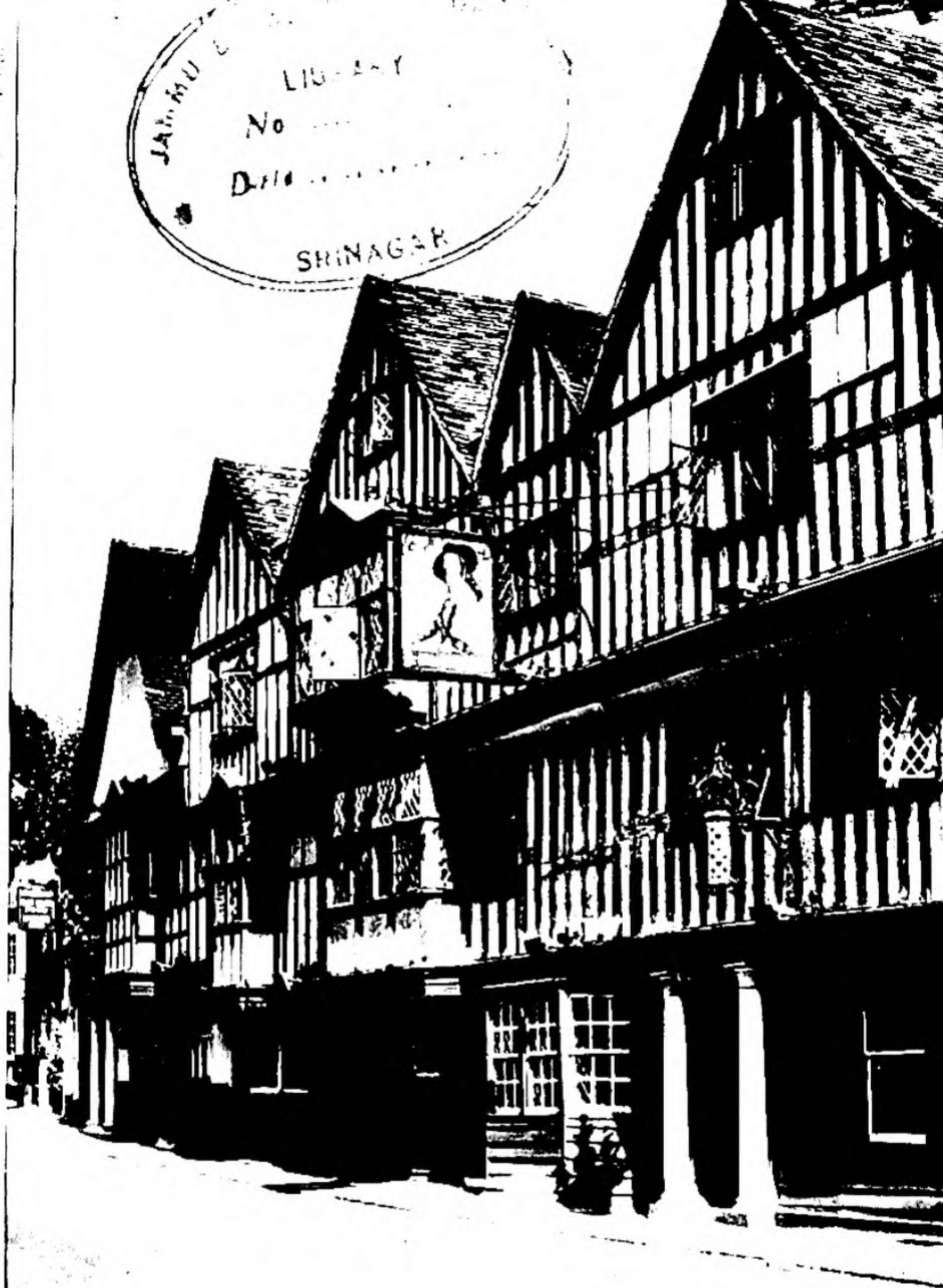
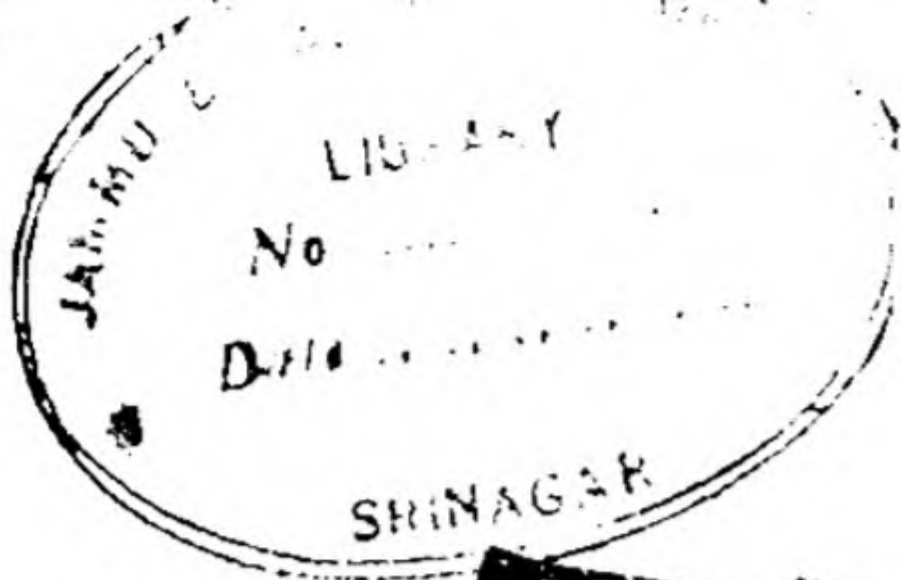
'IN a few days,' remarked Mr. Pickwick to his friends at Cobham, 'an election is to take place for the borough of Eatanswill, at which Mr. Perker, a gentleman whom I lately met, is the agent of one of the candidates. We will behold, and minutely examine, a scene so interesting to every Englishman.' In short, he had resolved to take a second journey, and that to Eatanswill. Where, then, is Eatanswill? The name, which breaks down into eat-an (d)-swill, was not intended to be complimentary, and that, no doubt, was the reason for disguising it. But Dickens was underestimating the distinction which even his ridicule conferred on a place. Apparently the basic principle in pride—local or personal—is that it is always better to be a somebody, no matter how disreputable, than a mere nobody. The delicacy of feeling that led Dickens to disguise the name was quite unnecessary, and after a contest almost as ridiculous in its way as that pilloried in the book, the honours, or dishonours, have long been appropriated by Sudbury, and woe betide anyone who disputes the right of this ancient and honourable borough to its dubious title.

The fun started in the late July of 1834, when Dickens as a young reporter of twenty-two went down into Suffolk to report an election. In a letter to Henry Austin, an old friend who later became his brother-in-law, he says: 'Don't laugh. I am going (alone) in a gig: and, to quote the eloquent inducements which the proprietors of Hampstead *shays* hold out to Sunday riders—"the gen'l'm'n drives himself". I am going into Essex and Suffolk. It strikes me I shall be spilt before I pay a turnpike. I have a presentiment I shall run over an only child before I reach Chelmsford, my first stage.'

The letter was written from a 'three-pair back', which

signifies a modest and dingy apartment at the top of a steep, dark staircase at 13 Furnival's Inn, which was all his job on the staff of the *Morning Chronicle* would allow. He was then unmarried, and when he did marry his quarters were still in Furnival's Inn, which has now gone, but at No. 15, in rooms where much of *Pickwick* was written, and where his eldest son, Charles the younger, was born. So when Dickens took up the reins and encouraged his pony to a brisk trot in the direction of East Anglia he was a young blade with the world before him, surrounded, no doubt, by the adoring young ladies who usually wait upon ambitious youth, with *Sketches by Boz* to his credit as an author, and with a commission for *Pickwick Papers* in one of the drawers of his desk. As his gig rattled over the cobbles, and the seat rocked backwards and forwards, he had every reason to feel pleased with himself, and he would flick the whip across his horse's flanks as he thought of his luck in having this new field thrown open to him for the further adventure of the Pickwick Club just when the company had been so auspiciously augmented by the advent of Samuel Weller. As every new sight and sound stimulated his imagination, he would think of the reports he would write for his paper with his right hand, and the pages for *Pickwick* with his left, to say nothing of the letters he could always find time to write to his friends whenever either hand happened to be free for a few moments. Of one thing we may be certain, he never wrote long screeds complaining that his exhausting occupation left him with no time for writing. All he desired was constant employment and variety of experience, knowing that if he got enough of these his books would write themselves.

His first stage, he says, was Chelmsford, where, sad to relate, he found nothing whatever worth introducing into the peregrinations of Pickwick. The Black Boy Inn receives a passing reference. Dickens himself put up at this fine old Essex hostelry, but although it was a house worthy of such distinguished patronage, Mr. Pickwick was not allowed to stay there. This particular Black Boy at Chelmsford, which



THE KING'S HEAD, CHIGWELL, THE 'MAYPOLE' OF BARNABY RUDGE



was demolished in 1857, had been the town house of the De Veres, the illustrious earls of Oxford, whose castle at Hedingham is so noble a relic. When converted into a hostelry in the seventeenth century the Chelmsford Black Boy was known as the Crown or New Inn,¹ and some of its carved woodwork, including the boar's head of the De Veres, is now in Chelmsford Museum.

The trouble in Chelmsford was neither the inn nor the town. It was the weather. It was rain that made Dickens write of Chelmsford that it was 'the dullest and most stupid spot on the face of the earth'. He never saw the town properly. Writing of his week-end there he says: 'I can't get an *Athenaeum* or *Literary Gazette*—no not even a penny magazine, and here I am on a wet Sunday looking out of a d——d large bow window at the rain as it falls into the puddles opposite: wondering when it will be dinner-time and cursing my folly in having put no books into my portmanteau. The only book I have seen here is one that lies upon the sofa. It is entitled *Field Exercises and Evolution of the Army* by Sir Henry Towers. I have read it through so often that I am sure I could drill a hundred recruits from memory. There is not even anything to look at in the place except two immense prisons, large enough to hold all the inhabitants of the county—whom they have been built for I can't imagine.'

Of the drive from Braintree to Chelmsford, a distance of twelve miles, and all the electioneering excitement he encountered along the route, he wrote more vivaciously: 'I wish to God you would have seen me tooling in and out of the banners, drums, conservative emblems, horsemen, and go-carts with which every little green was filled as the processions were waiting for Sir John Tyrell and Baring. Every time the horse heard a drum he bounced into the hedge on the left side of the road and every time I got him out of that he bounded into the hedge on the right side . . . with the trifling exception of breaking my whip, I flatter myself I did the whole thing in something like style.'

¹ *The Dickensian*, 1917, p. 214.

But the election that mattered to Dickens was the one at Eatanswill, or Sudbury, to which he returned in the following January for another fight. Of the 1835 contest he wrote so pointedly that an eminent Sudbury Liberal took the matter up in a violent letter of protest printed in the *Morning Chronicle* of 9 January, 1835, and in doing so showed how well the cap fitted. The claim that Sudbury was the one and only Eatanswill did not, however, gain a firm basis until March 1907, when Mr. C. Finden Waters, landlord of the Sudbury Rose and Crown, read a paper to a recently formed local society called the Eatanswill Club, established with the objects of promoting good fellowship and guarding the claims of Sudbury to be the veritable Eatanswill of *Pickwick Papers*. He proved that Dickens had in fact been in Sudbury on the 25 and 26 July, 1834, and again in January 1835, and quoted reports of these Parliamentary elections from the files of the *Essex Standard* which tallied with those of Dickens in *Pickwick*. At this time there were only four Parliamentary boroughs in Suffolk—Sudbury, Ipswich, Bury St. Edmunds, and Eye, so the choice was not wide.

The Eatanswill Club published an official journal, copies of which are now eagerly sought by collectors, and in No. IV of this estimable periodical the Pink-faced Gentleman is identified as a trebly-dyed blue named Mr. Fulcher. Elsewhere it is noted that one of the two successful candidates at Ipswich in 1835 was named Fitz-Roy Kelly, which we may think suggestive of Horatio Fitzkin, Esq., of Fitzkin Lodge, near Eatanswill.

The traditional headquarters of the Blues in Sudbury was the Rose and Crown, which is therefore identified with the Town Arms of Pickwick, while the Swan, which stood on a site adjoining the Corn Exchange, was the Peacock, the traditional headquarters of the Buffs, the house in which Tupman and Snodgrass lodged, and where the Bagman's Story was told. Both these houses have disappeared; but Dickens gives us a faithful likeness of the commercial rooms in such hostelries as the Swan in the middle of the nineteenth

century. 'Most people,' he says, 'know what sort of places commercial rooms usually are. That of the Peacock differed in no material respect from the generality of such apartments; that is to say, it was a large bare-looking room, the furniture of which had no doubt been better when it was newer, with a spacious table in the centre, and a variety of smaller dittos in the corners: an extensive assortment of variously shaped chairs, and an old Turkey carpet, bearing about the same relative proportion to the size of the room, as a lady's pocket-handkerchief might to the floor of a watch-box. The walls were garnished with one or two large maps; and several weather-beaten rough great coats, with complicated capes, dangled from a long row of pegs in one corner. The mantelshelf was ornamented with a wooden inkstand, containing one stump of a pen and half a wafer: a road-book and a directory: a county history minus the cover: and the mortal remains of a trout in a glass coffin. The atmosphere was redolent of tobacco-smoke, the fumes of which had communicated a rather dingy hue to the whole room, and more especially to the dusty red curtains which shaded the windows. On the sideboard a variety of miscellaneous articles were huddled together, the most conspicuous of which were some very cloudy fish-sauce cruets, a couple of driving-boxes, two or three whips and as many travelling shawls, a tray of knives and forks, and the mustard.' Such commercial rooms lingered in Suffolk longer than in most counties, and I have known at least one such room during the last ten years.

The Rose and Crown, the headquarters of the Blues, was burnt down in the early hours of New Year's Day, 1922, and with it went some of the most colourful chapters in Sudbury's history. From this house, in the first of the two elections in question, as reported in the *Essex Standard*, Sir Edward Barnes and his supporters sallied in proud procession, with a band to proclaim their confidence of victory, only to be set upon by Mr. Bagshaw's friends of the contrary persuasion, who were lying in ambush to await their arrival. Many windows of Tory supporters were smashed that night.

'Never,' reported the the *Essex Standard*, 'has there been a severer contest in the borough of Sudbury than the present; both parties are exerting themselves to the very utmost.' Well they might. When the result was declared at the end of the day it was found that both candidates had polled exactly 263 votes, and Sir Edward Barnes was declared elected on the casting vote of the mayor as returning officer.

In spite of the claims so eloquently put forward by the landlord of the Rose and Crown, it must be acknowledged that an impartial judge would find that certain of the electioneering improprieties of Eatanswill were observable at Ipswich also, which seems to have been the runner-up to Sudbury in electioneering notoriety. At the same time, there can be no doubt about Sudbury having been intended as the setting, notwithstanding Mr. Percy FitzGerald's conviction that Eatanswill was Ipswich. Perhaps the best reason for thinking so is that Mr. Pickwick travelled in the Norwich coach by way of Bury St. Edmunds, when the route of this particular coach was via Sudbury, not Ipswich. Both the Ipswich and the Norwich coaches started from the Bull Inn, Whitechapel, which was Tony Weller's starting point; but according to Cary's *Itinerary* they followed different routes. The Bull, incidentally, was owned and kept at this time by a Mrs. Anne Nelson, who had inherited extensive interests in London hostelries, and herself owned coaches. Mr. Charles G. Harper tells us that she was 'one of those stern, dignified, magisterial women of business, who were quite a remarkable feature of the coaching age, who saw their husbands off to an early grave and alone carried on the peculiarly exacting double business of inn-keeping and coaching proprietorship, and did so with success'. She was evidently one of the 'vidders' Tony Weller had occasion to fear! With the opening of railways into the eastern counties in 1839 the fortunes of the Bull declined and thirty years later it was pulled down.

Dickens knew what he was about when he took the Pickwickians into East Anglia in August. May had been the time

of year for Kent. For the corn-growing counties of the east August was the better month, and we are told how at this time of year: 'Orchards and corn-fields ring with the hum of labour; trees bend beneath the thick clusters of rich fruit which bow their branches to the ground; and the corn, piled in graceful sheaves, or waving in every light breath that sweeps above it, as if it wooed the sickle, tinges the landscape with a golden hue. A mellow softness appears to hang over the whole earth; the influence of the season seems to extend itself to the very waggon, whose slow motion across the well-reaped field, is perceptible only to the eye, but strikes with no harsh sound upon the ear.' It is an admirable description of West Suffolk, and all who love this quiet cultivated landscape will echo the sentiments of Mr. Pickwick and the inimitable Sam:

' "Delightful prospect, Sam," said Mr. Pickwick.

' "Beats the chimley pots, sir," replied Mr. Weller.'

And so they came at a brisk pace into the well-paved streets of the clean and handsome little town of Bury St. Edmunds, where they pulled up in front of the Angel, then in its prime as the principal coaching inn of West Suffolk, the opposite number, as it were, to the Great White Horse at Ipswich. Since 1779 this imposing Georgian house has stood with benign dignity to symbolize the most civilized and hospitable traditions of the English inn—as well it might, for it is a house with a long pedigree, which at one time or another has numbered among its clients the entire nobility of the county at the time of Bury Fair. As the Angel is named in *Pickwick*, there is no question about its identity, and in the yard may still be seen the pump under which Sam had his shower the following morning, to dispel 'the feverish remains of the previous evening's conviviality'. It was here that he met the young rascal in mulberry-coloured livery reading what appeared to be a hymn book. The place is authentic enough; but there is nothing to show which room Mr. Pickwick occupied. According to tradition, however, Dickens himself slept in No. 11 while reporting the 1835 election, and no doubt made notes for his description of Bury St. Edmunds, either mentally or

physically, in that room. He was there again to deliver readings on 13 October, 1859, and 30 October, 1861, and it is believed that on the second of these occasions anyhow he occupied room No. 15. He was then living in a whirl of excitement, reading and being fêted, but he usually had time for a letter to someone, and from Bury St. Edmunds on this second reading he wrote to Wilkie Collins: 'Last night I read *Copperfield* at Bury St. Edmunds to a very fine audience. I don't think a word—not to say an idea—was lost!'

The artful rogue in mulberry was, of course, Job Trotter, the accomplice of Alfred Jingle in enticing Mr. Pickwick to undertake an imprudent mission on enclosed premises: to wit, to prevent an elopement from the girls' boarding-school at Westgate House, as described in Chapter XVI of *Pickwick Papers*. The identification of the school is not so simple as one might think. A certain house in Bury St. Edmunds itself is pointed out as the one in question. Several commentators have said that he had Eastgate House at Rochester in mind. Dickens himself said that as a matter of fact the original of Westgate House was in Ipswich. So as we decided at the outset that if we were going to be wrong about anything we should try to be wrong with Dickens rather than right with his blue-pencillers, the Ipswich house it must be.

The authority for the Ipswich identification is Mr. Herbert Walker, a former secretary and librarian to the Ipswich Institute, who said that the secretary of the committee which arranged the first Dickens reading in Ipswich told him that on the morning after the event a group of admirers waited upon the novelist at the Great White Horse, and asked him certain questions, one of which concerned the original of this particular school. It was actually, said Dickens, in Ipswich, not Bury St. Edmunds, and he offered to show it to them. He added that it was quite near, in St. Clement's parish. It was, in fact, in St. Nicholas's parish, but that is a trifling matter. The important thing is that the house was there all right.

Dickens visited Ipswich three times during his reading

tours. The first reading was on 10 October, 1859, the last on 31 October, 1861. The first and second, incidentally, were given in the old Corn Exchange, which stood on the site now occupied by the post office, and not, as Mr. Walter Dexter and those who have copied him have stated, in the Mechanics' Institute Lecture Hall. On each occasion he stayed at the Great White Horse, against which he seems to have had a grudge, but one that has long been forgiven in return for the publicity he gave this grand old house.

In the twenty-second chapter of *Pickwick* we read how Mr. Pickwick took his seat on the Ipswich coach in the yard of the Bull Inn at Whitechapel, and rattled out of London along the Whitechapel and Mile End roads to the admiration of all who saw them, and, with Tony Weller holding the reins, came in due course into the main street of Ipswich. There, 'on the left-hand side of the way, a short distance after you have passed through the open space fronting the Town Hall, stands an inn known far and wide by the appellation of the Great White Horse, rendered the more conspicuous by a stone statue of some rampacious animal with flowing mane and tail, distantly resembling an insane cart-horse, which is elevated above the principal door. The Great White Horse is famous in the neighbourhood, in the same degree as a prize ox, or county paper-chronicled turnip, or unwieldy pig—for its enormous size. Never were such labyrinths of uncarpeted passages, such clusters of mouldy, ill-lighted rooms, such huge numbers of small dens for eating or sleeping in, beneath any one roof, as are collected together between the four walls of the Great White Horse at Ipswich.'

At the door of the 'overgrown tavern' the coach stopped, and its principal passengers dismounted. At the time in question the Great White Horse was a gabled, heavily timbered building, with a finely carved corner-post at the end of Northgate Street.

The description of the Great White Horse in *Pickwick Papers* can only have been based on Dickens's own experi-

ence of the house during the time he spent there while covering the election of 1835. It is far from complimentary. The party were conducted down a long dark passage into a 'badly-furnished apartment, with a dirty grate, in which a small fire was making a wretched attempt to be cheerful, but was fast sinking beneath the dispiriting influence of the place'. So incensed was the landlord, William Brooks, by this account of his inn that he threatened to take action. Fortunately he changed his mind, and since then he and his successors have recovered the value of the alleged damage to their reputation many times over from the publicity they have received. Today the Great White Horse does full justice to Dickens, and those who are fortunate enough—as I have been—to be allotted bedroom No. 32, with its handsome four-posters and pretty Victorian hangings, will have the ideal scene for imagining such an adventure as that of Mr. Pickwick with the middle-aged lady in yellow curl-papers.

When Dickens toured the eastern counties in the autumn of 1861 his complaints were about Norwich, not Ipswich. In a letter from the now demolished Royal Hotel, which stood in Norwich Market Place, he referred to his Norfolk audience as 'a very lumpish audience indeed . . . an intent and staring audience. They laughed, though, very well, and the storm made them shake themselves again. But they were not magnetic, and the great big place (St. Andrew's Hall) was out of sorts somehow.'

He had been in Norfolk more than once before that date, and as early as 1836 had travelled as far north in Suffolk as Bungay, an old town of character on the Waveney, the river which divides Norfolk from Suffolk, with a commission to write up a banquet given in the theatre there to John Childs, the Bungay 'martyr', one of the many ardent nonconformists of those days who chose to go to prison, or have their goods sold up, rather than pay church rates. The guest of honour at this banquet was Daniel O'Connell, the 'Irish Liberator', as his friends called him. The most important of his visits to Norfolk itself was at

the end of 1848, because this was the visit which ignited the spark that gave *David Copperfield* an East Anglian setting. Our first intimation of what was afoot comes on 31 December, 1848, when Dickens wrote to Forster about a proposed visit to Norwich and Stanfield Hall, a moated Tudor manor-house which had recently gained notoriety as the scene of the murder on the night of 28 November of Isaac Jermy, Recorder of Norwich, and his son, by James Blomfield Rush, who was afterwards executed at Norwich Castle. After visiting the house Dickens said that it had 'a murderous look that seemed to invite such a crime'. It had, incidentally, been the home of Sir John Robsart, the father of Amy Robsart, whose murder in another place is related by Scott in *Kenilworth*.

The 1849 visit to Norfolk was in the company of Leech and Lemon, two friends with whom he had been on other jaunts into the country; but apparently Dickens himself was not up to the mark, and this, we may think, coloured his reaction to Norwich. On the morning of 8 January we find him writing: 'I have had a miserably bad night's rest, and am rather seedy in consequence this morning, but hope to be improved by a ride to Stanfield Hall (9 miles off) and afterwards to Yarmouth, whither we are going this afternoon.' Yarmouth had a stronger appeal. He stayed at the Royal Hotel, Marine Parade, and was fascinated by the Rows, which gave him the idea of describing the town as the 'Norfolk Gridiron'. Yarmouth, he said, was 'the strangest place in the world; one hundred and forty-six miles of hill-less marsh between it and London'. It was just the kind of place he wanted as setting for a story that was taking shape in his mind, and he determined to try his hand at a description, with the result that on the open Denes at Yarmouth he placed the home of Little Em'ly and the Peggottys, taking the idea for their curious habitation from one he had seen on the marshes of the Thames Estuary, although such dwellings were not uncommon in those days, and it is quite possible that he saw one at Yarmouth also.

The Duke's Head, Yarmouth, is identified as the inn

where David Copperfield met William, the friendly waiter. At that time it was the principal coaching inn.

The rest of the East Anglian setting provided for *David Copperfield* he discovered while staying with Sir Morton Peto at Somerleyton Hall, near Lowestoft. Blundeston, the original of David's Blunderstone, is near at hand, and when Dickens drove from Yarmouth to Somerleyton he would take the road so graphically described in the novel, stopping, perhaps, at The Village Maid at Lound, the public-house where Barkis took 'such a long time delivering a bedstead', if not also at the Plough Inn, Blundeston, 'our village ale house', from which Barkis started. At the time of Dickens's visit the village carrier did start from the Plough, and his name was Barker. The identification of the birthplace is not so easy. It is now generally accepted that in describing the Rookery he had the Rectory in mind. In many respects it fits the description reasonably well—externally better than internally. In fact the best argument in favour of the Rectory being the Rookery is based on the passage describing Peggotty bursting from a hedge and climbing into Barkis's cart to hand David the 'bags of cakes' and the purse containing the three bright shillings she 'had evidently polished up with whitening', when he was packed off to school. If we examine the topography of Blundeston we see that the cart would travel along two sides of the field adjoining the Rectory, and that by running across the field Peggotty would be able to intercept the cart without the knowledge of the Murdstones. But, as usual, there are difficulties. The other claim is for Blundeston Hall, and it is freely acknowledged that the interior of this house corresponds more closely with the description of David's birthplace as we have it in Chapter II. Moreover it is claimed that Dickens did, in fact, call at the Hall, and was shown round by the housekeeper. There is no evidence that he was ever inside the Rectory. It is the Hall rather than the Rectory that has the long passage leading from Peggotty's kitchen to the front door, the dark storeroom 'that is a place to be run past at night', and other familiar features

of the story. On the other hand the gravestones can be seen from the Rectory, but not from the Hall, and if we accept the Rectory as the Rookery we can look back with David while 'turning the corner of a lane near' his home and see Mr. Murdstone leaning against the wicket of the churchyard, talking with Mr. Quinion.

Similar difficulties arise at the church. The sundial is there, and from the family pews inside we can visualize Peggotty gazing through the window, 'out of which our house can be seen, and is seen many times during the morning's service'. Peggotty, we remember, liked to assure herself that the Rookery had not burst into flames or been robbed while the family were at church. But there are no high-backed pews at Blundeston. These, it seems, were introduced from his memories of the church he and his family attended at Chatham.

In short, Dickens took what he wanted from Blundeston, and the rest he introduced from other places, as, of course, he was perfectly entitled to do. And the skill is in the use made of these carefully assembled parts. Think, for example, of Peggotty's kitchen opening on to a back-yard, which is common enough; but also on to 'a pigeon-house on a pole in the centre without any pigeons in it, a great dog kennel in a corner without any dog, and a quantity of fowls that looked terribly at me, walked about in a menacing manner'. It is in such details as these that he makes his commonplace scenes unique. How keen his observation was! We may recall how David remembers that the garden at the back was 'a very preserve of butterflies'. He was quite right. These dry East Anglian lanes are exceptionally full of them in summer; but not everyone notices it.

David Copperfield was Dickens's favourite work, and the one he read from most frequently. Apparently it had been so from the beginning, because in the preface he writes: 'It would concern the reader little, perhaps, to know how sorrowfully the pen is laid down at the close of a two years' imaginative task, or how the author feels as if he were dismissing some portion of himself into the shadowy world

when a crowd of the creatures of his brain are going from him for ever. . . . Of all my books I like this the best.'

The book which the reader likes best will depend on a variety of circumstances, not the least of which is familiarity with the scene of the story. *Pickwick* is still the prime favourite of most people. After *Pickwick*, it may be one of half a dozen or more. For the people of West Essex it is probably *Barnaby Rudge*, associated as it is in their minds with the Maypole Inn of old John Willet, which most of us maintain is The King's Head at Chigwell, a hostelry worthy of so proud an association. But again the claim is not above suspicion. The King's Head fits the description perfectly in all but minor particulars. Moreover, we know that Dickens loved the village and stayed himself at the King's Head in 1841, the year in which *Barnaby Rudge* was published in the original parts. In a letter to Forster he said: 'Chigwell, my dear fellow, is the greatest place in the world. Name your day for going. Such a delicious old inn opposite the churchyard—such a lovely ride—such beautiful forest scenery—such an out-of-the-way rural place—such a sexton! I say again, name your day.' But while we know that Dickens and Forster visited Chigwell this year and stayed at the King's Head, we do not know whether at this time the inn occupied the whole of the building described as having 'more gable ends than a lazy man would care to count on a sunny day'. We know there had been a time when it had occupied the whole building—when indeed it had been the most important inn for miles. It was the place where the Forest Courts were held, and what is now called the Chester Room—because it is supposed to be the room in which John Chester had his interview with Geoffrey Haredale—is the old court room, afterwards known as the chest room—the room that contained the great chest in which, presumably, the documents connected with the Verderers', or Forty-Day, Court were kept.

But the fortunes of the King's Head declined, and the greater part of the building became a property described in a title deed of 1845 as having been known formerly as

'The White House or Great House or King's Head', with the licensed premises confined to what later became adjoining cottages. It may, however, have resumed its former state in 1841. In the 1820s it was well known as a popular baiting house on the busy coach road into East Anglia, while for the conveyance of local residents there was a daily coach service between the King's head at Chigwell and the Blue Boar at Aldgate. This, however, would not justify so large a house. It is significant that even John Willet thought little of coaches, regarding them as 'things that ought to be indicted as disturbers of the peace of mankind, as restless, busy, hornblowing contrivances. . . . "If you like to wait for 'em, you can, but we don't know anything about 'em, they may call and they may not—there's a carrier—he was looked upon as quite good enough for us, when *I* was a boy.'" So he was, no doubt, when Dickens was a boy. Gradually, however, the growth of London brought Chigwell and its hospitable inn within reach of heavily populated areas. At first it would be patronized by city merchants and bankers who had country houses in Essex. They would drive their wives and families out to Chigwell in their carriages-and-pairs, and after a meal at the King's Head disport themselves in the pleasant lanes and water-meadows between there and Abridge. By the 1850s, when it was undoubtedly of its present proportions, the King's Head had achieved the distinction of being patronized by official and public bodies of various kinds, who held their conferences in the Chester Room after dining on pigeon pie.

While Dickens was alive there were many Chigwellians who could remember the time when the greater part of the King's Head was called The White House, and housed a girls' school. And in one passage in *Barnaby Rudge* Dickens himself describes a scene in the Chester Room in a way which suggests that he knew about this:

'Rich rustling hangings, waving on the walls; and better far, the rustling of youth and beauty's dress, the light of women's eyes, outshining the tapers and their own rich jewels; the sound of gentle tongues, and music, and the

tread of maiden feet, had once been there, and filled it with delight. But they were gone, and with them all its gladness. It was no longer a home—children were never born and bred there. . . . God help the man whose heart ever changes with the world, as an old mansion when it becomes an inn.'

Fortunately for us, a family associated with the district, the Powells of Luctons, Buckhurst Hill, had a town house next door to Dickens in Tavistock Square, and one day Mrs. Powell asked Dickens which inn he had in mind, the King's Head at Chigwell or the Maypole at Chigwell Row—that is to say, the old inn, which stands behind the present Maypole—when he described the Maypole Inn of *Barnaby Rudge*. She pointed out that the difficulty local people had in accepting the King's Head as the Maypole was that Chigwell had no village green, while on the other hand, Chigwell Row Church hardly fitted the description, because it was modern. One of Mrs. Powell's daughters once told me that Dickens's reply was that he had 'patched', that is to say, he had followed his usual practice and produced a composite picture. As for the green, once he had decided to call his inn the Maypole, it was obvious that he must have a green for it.

What of the Warren, the Great House of the story? Some have argued that this was the recently demolished Rolls Park, formerly the home of the Harveys, and more recently of Sir Francis Lloyd. Most Dickensians, however, will agree that it was old Loughton Hall, which was destroyed by fire in December 1836.

Dickens took at least one Pickwickian from the Epping Forest neighbourhood, and one ready-made for him. At High Beach, a bold escarpment overlooking the Lea Valley on the opposite side of the forest from Chigwell, stands Arabin House, which takes its name from Serjeant Arabin, a gentleman with an extensive practice at the Bar, but one who was never remarkable either for lucidity of speech or obvious intelligence. In later life he became somewhat hard of hearing. Serjeant Arabin was the original of Serjeant Snubbin, leading counsel for the defence in the trial of Bardell *v.* Pickwick, and if anyone thinks the account in

Pickwick exaggerated, he has only to turn up Serjeant Robinson's *Recollections* to be disabused by first-hand impressions of Arabin's conduct in court by a brother judiciary. This is the kind of thing he will find:

Arabin: 'Well, witness, your name is John Tomkins.'

Witness: 'No, my lord, John Taylor.'

Arabin: 'Ah, I see, you are a sailor, and you live in the New Cut.'

Witness: 'No, my lord, I live at Wapping.'

Arabin: 'Never mind your being out shopping. Had you your watch?'

What a gift he was for Dickens!

CHAPTER IX

TRAVELS IN THE WEST COUNTRY

ALTHOUGH there were six Pickwickian excursions, most of the places visited can be grouped in three regions: Kent, East Anglia, and, more extensively, the West Country, with a detour into the Midlands. With the West Country, as with the other two, much of the verve and spirit of the writing springs from the freshness of those early impressions collected when, as a youthful journalist, he was driven post-haste into remote parts of the country in search of political news. It is no wonder that later in life he became a keen horseman. The most resolute rider to hounds was never more eager and daring in pursuit of prey than Dickens was in pursuit of print. Frequently, he tells us, his notes would be transcribed during 'the smallest hours of the night in a swift flying carriage and pair' by the light of a flickering candle. Laughing about these early reporting days, he recalled while discussing them with Forster in 1845 how he was able to charge for 'all sorts of breakages fifty times in a journey without question', because of the pace at which he was compelled to travel. He thought that at one time or another he must have charged his employers for everything except a broken head, which, he added, was 'the only thing they would have grumbled to pay for'.

The most fruitful of these excursions into the West Country were undertaken in 1835, in the company of his newspaper colleague, Thomas Beard, with the object of reporting for the *Morning Chronicle* the speeches delivered in the course of Lord John Russell's election campaigns. There were two of them that year. The important one from our point of view was during May, when Lord John offered himself for re-election to the people of South Devon after he had accepted the office of Home Secretary in Lord



THE LION HOTEL, SHREWSBURY

Millar and



Street in Dundee

Melbourne's government. It rained continuously throughout the campaign, and when Lord John made an open-air speech in the castle yard at Exeter, Dickens took it down in shorthand while his friend held a pocket handkerchief over his notebook to keep it dry, 'after the manner of a state canopy in an ecclesiastical procession'. On this occasion Lord John was defeated. He got in at a by-election at Stroud in November of the same year.

It was inevitable that many of the experiences gained at this time should have found their way into *Pickwick*. At Bristol, for example, he put up at the Bush Inn, which until 1864 occupied the site of Lloyd's Bank in Corn Street, near the Guildhall, and it was here that the 'ill-starred gentleman', Mr. Winkle, found temporary refuge in his flight from the wrath of the infuriated Dowler, only to be discovered by Sam Weller and called to account for his irregular, if entirely innocent, behaviour.

No doubt Dickens, as well as Winkle, found Bristol 'a shade more dirty than any place he had ever seen', and was equally puzzled by the 'manifold windings and twistings' of its streets. But it was in such intricate byways as these that he stumbled upon both the characters and incidents that crowd, and sometimes overcrowd, his plots. So we are not surprised that Bob Sawyer and Ben Allen should have turned up at Bristol, the former installed in a newly painted property—'something between a shop and a private house', with the word SURGERY set up above the window of what had formerly been the front parlour.

It was at Bristol, we remember, that Sam Weller was entrusted with a mission of love. Poor unhappy Arabella Allen had been sent to stay with an old aunt at Clifton until she was sufficiently reduced in spirit to accept her brother's will for her and marry his crony, Bob Sawyer. Sam again was not the only one who had walked 'up one street and down another'—we were going to say, up one hill and down another, only it's all uphill at Clifton! Clifton is like that. But eventually he reached his destination, which in his case was a group of 'several little villas of quiet and

secluded appearance', at one of which he received the information that quickly led him to Miss Allen.

Dickens made his first public appearance at Bristol in 1851, when he took part in the performance of *Not so Bad as We Seem* at the Victoria Rooms, Clifton, in aid of the Guild of Literature and Art. His first reading was given on 19 January, 1858. On 2 August of the same year he was there again and wrote of the occasion: 'In that large room at Clifton, the people were perfectly taken off their legs by *The Chimes*—started—looked at each other—started again—looked at me—and then burst into a storm of applause.' So successful was the reading that he appeared again four days later, when 'a torrent of five hundred shillings bore Arthur [Smith] away, pounded him against the wall, flowed on to the seats over his body, scratched him, and damaged his best dress suit. All to his unspeakable joy.' This extraordinary success was followed by further readings at Clifton on 9 and 10 May, 1866, and 20 and 25 January, 1869. At this final appearance the effect of what he described as 'by far the best Murder yet done' was so potent that he wrote to his daughter: 'At Clifton on Monday night we had a contagion of fainting; and yet the place was not hot. I should think we had from a dozen to twenty ladies taken out stiff and rigid, at various times! It became quite ridiculous.'

More important than Bristol, however, in the topography of Pickwick, if not of Dickens, is Bath, where, most propitiously, Lord John Russell spoke at a banquet during the contest that first took Dickens into the West Country. Immediately after the speech Dickens and Beard had to catch the 'Cooper Company's Coach, leaving the Bush (Bristol) at half-past six next morning', and get such rest as they could in the intervals of transcribing the speech, which had to be ready for the printer when they reached London. But important as Bath is in Dickens, the city was never a favourite with him personally. He liked places that were either slap up-to-date or romantically and genially old. Bath, to Dickens, was a city of the dead. But fortunately

he did not discover on this first visit how dead—according to his own particular standards—it was. The truth is, of course, that he saw very little indeed of Bath in 1835, and nothing of its real life. But he was there again in 1837.

When Mr. Pickwick and Sam set out for Bath from the White Horse Cellar in Piccadilly a momentous discovery was made. Mr. Winkle was already in the coach, and Mr. Pickwick was about to follow him when Sam came up and whispered in his master's ear:

“Here's rayther a rum go, sir. . . . I'm very much afeerd, sir, that the proprietor o' this here coach is a playin' some imperence vith us.”

He then pointed to the name of PICKWICK displayed in gilt letters of a goodly size on the side of the vehicle.

“Dear me,” exclaimed Mr. Pickwick, “what a very extraordinary thing.”

“Yes, but that ain't all,” said Sam, “not content with writing up Pickwick, they puts Moses afore it, vich I calls adding insult to injury.”

The misappropriation, if such it may be called, of the name of Pickwick in this instance was not by the worthy proprietor of the Bath coaches, but by Dickens, who would have seen it as he travelled westward on his reporting excursions. It is true that it is also the name of a village near Bath, the village from which the grandfather of Moses hailed; but the personal name is a much more likely source, particularly as Moses Pickwick was a well-known innkeeper in Bath as well as the proprietor of the London-to-Bath service of coaches.

Of the beauty of the scenery along the Bath road, at that time the most famous coaching road in the kingdom, Dickens says little. But he does mention a roadside inn near Marlborough Downs, which is usually identified as the Waggon and Horses at Beckhampton. ‘It was a strange old place,’ he says, ‘built of a kind of shingle, inlaid, as it were, with cross-beams, with the gable-topped windows projecting over the pathway, and a low door with a dark porch, and a couple of steep steps leading down into the house, instead of

the modern fashion of half a dozen shallow ones leading up to it.' This was the place where Tom Smart drank hot punch in front of a fire 'piled half-way up the chimney, and roaring and crackling with a sound that of itself would have warmed the heart of any reasonable man'. In such genial conditions as these it is not surprising that Tom's heart should have softened towards the buxom landlady.

Safely arrived at Bath, which was a considerable achievement in those days, Mr. Pickwick and his friends put up for two or three nights at Moses Pickwick's hotel, the White Hart—demolished in 1867 to make way for the Grand Pump Room Hotel. In accordance with custom—by which all things are governed in Bath—they were waited upon the following morning by Angelo Cyrus Bantam, Esq., Master of Ceremonies, who greeted them in the affected manner demanded by his office with:

' "Welcome to Ba-ath, sir. This is indeed an acquisition. Most welcome to Ba-ath, sir. It is long—very long, Mr. Pickwick, since you drank the waters. It appears an age, Mr. Pickwick. Re-markable!" . . .

' "It is a very long time since I drank the waters, certainly," replied Mr. Pickwick; "for to the best of my knowledge I was never here before."

' "Never in Ba-ath, Mr. Pickwick!" exclaimed the Grand Master, letting the hand fall in astonishment. "Never in Ba-ath! He! he! Mr. Pickwick, you are a wag."'

According to the book they were then conducted to the Assembly Rooms; but this is a mistake. They would be taken to the Pump Room, the place described as: 'a spacious saloon, ornamented with Corinthian pillars, and a music gallery, and a Tompion clock, and a statue of Nash, and a golden inscription, to which all the water-drinkers should attend, for it appeals to them in the cause of a deserving charity. There is a large bar with a marble vase, out of which the pumper gets the water; and there are a number of yellow-looking tumblers, out of which the company get it; and it is a most edifying and satisfactory sight to behold the perseverance and gravity with which they swallow it. . . .

There is another pump-room, into which infirm ladies and gentlemen are wheeled, in such an astonishing variety of chairs and chaises, that any adventurous individual who goes in with the regular number of toes, is in imminent danger of coming out without them; and there is a third, into which the quiet people go, for it is less noisy than either. There is an immensity of promenading, on crutches and off, with sticks and without, and a great deal of conversation, and liveliness, and pleasantry.'

In the evening they went to the Assembly Rooms to attend a ball, at which such distinguished visitors to the spa as Lord Mutanhead, the Dowager Lady Snuphanulph, Mrs. Colonel Wugsby, and Miss Bolo were pointed out. Here the scene is described with full Dickensian gusto, with the rustle of silken dresses, the waving of feathered fans, the dazzle of lights and the sparkle of jewels as the company pass to and fro along the passages, and up and down the glittering staircases. And no less conspicuously than the nobility in this dazzling assembly were the inevitable match-making mammas, presenting their simpering daughters wherever they could secure an introduction, and glancing imperiously or furtively, according to circumstances, towards the knots of foppish young men sprinkled about the rooms.

Of the outdoor appearance of Bath, Dickens says little. Palladian architecture was not in his line. He tells us that after taking a turn round the city Mr. Pickwick and his friends 'arrived at the unanimous conclusion that Park Street was very much like the perpendicular streets a man sees in a dream, which he cannot get up for the life of him', but says nothing about the Parades, which one might have expected to appeal to such a dandy as Dickens, and were then in their glory. As Mr. Pickwick and his party stayed in Bath for about four months they might be expected to know the place pretty thoroughly. Unfortunately their creator had never himself been in Bath for nearly so long a time. When *Pickwick* was being written he had only the quick impressions gathered in his reporting excursions to draw on. But even the increased knowledge and maturer

taste that he acquired in later years did nothing to enhance his regard for Bath. Not one of his references to the outward face of the city is complimentary. In Chapter LVI of *Bleak House*, for example, he refers to it as 'that grass-grown city of the ancients', and in a letter to Forster dated 27 January, 1869, he says, 'Landor's ghost goes along the silent streets here before me. . . . The place looks to me like a cemetery which the dead have succeeded in rising and taking. Having built streets of their old gravestones, they wander about scantily trying to "look alive". A dead failure.' Landor, incidentally, was one of the ghosts of Bath with whom Dickens was personally acquainted. On 7 February, 1840, during what was probably his longest stay in Bath—three weeks or so—along with his wife, Maclise, and Forster he visited him there. It was during this visit that he conceived Little Nell of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, whom he may have discussed with Landor, because the old master is said to have stated that one of his regrets in life was at not having bought the house in which Dickens first thought of Little Nell, so that he could have burnt it to the ground to prevent its being desecrated by any meaner associations.

The building most of us would regard with greater interest, the house in Royal Crescent occupied by Mr. Pickwick and his friends, cannot be identified precisely; but as Nos. 15 and 16 are said to be the only two let out in this way at the appropriate time it was probably one or other of these. The landlady's name, Mrs. Craddock, does not assist us further. It was the name of the lady in whose house he spent his honeymoon at Chalk.

The other building with special interest for Dickensians is the former greengrocer's shop, now alleged to be the Beaufort Arms in Princes Street, where, in a small back-parlour was held the 'friendly swarry, consisting of a boiled leg of mutton with the usual trimmings,' organized by the select company of Bath footmen. Whether the Beaufort Arms is in fact the place remains in doubt, although it seems to be established that the back-parlour of the greengrocer's shop that stood here was a rendezvous for footmen

in the eighteen-thirties. Its position is likely enough. We are told that after finding Mr. Joseph Smaulker 'leaning his powdered head against a lamp-post', Sam Weller was taken 'towards High Street', then down a by-street to the shop, where the full splendour of the scene burst upon Mr. Weller's view. 'A couple of tables were put together in the middle of the parlour, covered with three or four cloths of different ages and dates of washing, arranged to look as much like one as the circumstances of the case would allow. Upon these were laid knives and forks for six or eight people. Some of the knife handles were green, others red, and a few yellow; and as all the forks were black, the combination of colours was exceedingly striking. Plates for a corresponding number of guests were warming behind the fender; and the guests themselves were warming before it.'

Dickens enjoyed several holiday excursions into the West Country, and these gave rise to casual references in the novels. Thus Dick Swiveller of *The Old Curiosity Shop* was 'the nephew of Rebecca Swiveller, Spinster, deceased, of Cheselbourne in Dorsetshire', a relationship which brought him an annuity of £150 a year and enabled him to marry the Marchioness and live in comfort in a cottage at Hampstead. Other passing references can be found, most of them amounting to little; but Exeter is of special importance. It first took his fancy during the May 1835 reporting trip. In 1839 he returned on a more personal mission. He decided that the time had come for his parents to settle in the country, out of the way of temptation, for the remaining years of their lives, and Exeter appealed to him as a place that had all they required, with the not inconsiderable advantage to himself of keeping them far enough away from London. The home he found for them was Mile End Cottage, Alphington, of which he wrote to Forster:

'I took a little house for them this morning, and if they are not pleased with it I shall be grievously disappointed. Exactly a mile beyond the city on the Plymouth road there are two white cottages: one is theirs and the other belongs to their landlady. I almost forget the number of rooms;

but there is an excellent parlour with two other rooms on the ground-floor; there is really a beautiful little room over the parlour which I am furnishing as a drawing-room, and there is a splendid garden. The paint and paper throughout are new and fresh and cheerful-looking, the place is clean beyond all description, and the neighbourhood I suppose the most beautiful in this most beautiful of English counties.' The rent was £20 a year, and Dickens spent £70 on furnishings. What, we wonder, did the old lady who owned it think of her new tenants, and did John Dickens and his wife join her each Sunday in the 'lined' pew which she was so proud to possess in the best part of the church, and in which there were two sittings to be had with the house 'for nothing'. The coincidence that the Exeter cottage was called Mile End Cottage and his parents had started their married life at Mile End Terrace, Portsmouth, would appeal to Dickens.

Twenty years later Dickens was to visit Exeter twice in the course of his reading tours.

Torquay is not mentioned in the novels, although Dickens read there in public in 1862 and 1869. In fact his final appearance at Torquay was so successful that the receipts amounted to nearly £270, a sum 'unprecedented in the history of entertainments in the town'. Plymouth is mentioned in *Bleak House*, but is chiefly memorable as the place where Mrs. Micawber's relations were influential. Mrs. Nickleby came from 'a sequestered part of the county of Devonshire' somewhere near Dawlish, and when a school-girl 'always went at least twice every year to the Hawkinses at Taunton Vale'. And so we might go on. As usual, romantic quaintness appealed to him most of all, and for this reason Clovelly is given a delightful description as Steepways in the 1860 Christmas Number of *Household Words*:¹

'Captain Jorgan had to look high at it, for the village was built sheer up the face of a steep and lofty cliff. There was no road in it, there was no wheeled vehicle in it, there was not a level yard in it. From the sea-beach to the cliff-

¹ *Message From the Sea.*

top two irregular rows of white houses, placed opposite to one another, and twisting here and there, and there and here, rose, like the sides of a long succession of stages of crooked ladders, and you climbed up the village or climbed down the village by the staves between, some six feet wide or so, and made of sharp irregular stones.

'The old pack-saddle, long laid aside in most parts of England as one of the appendages of its infancy, flourished here intact. Strings of pack-horses and pack-donkeys toiled slowly up the staves of the ladders, bearing fish, and coal, and such other cargo as was unshipping at the pier from the dancing fleet of village boats, and from two or three little coasting traders. As the beasts of burden ascended laden, or descended light, they got so lost at intervals in the floating clouds of village smoke, that they seemed to dive down some of the village chimneys, and come to the surface again far off, high above others. . . . The red-brown cliffs, richly wooded to their extremest verge, had their softened and beautiful forms reflected in the bluest water, under the clear North Devonshire sky of a November day without a cloud. The village itself was so steeped in autumnal foliage, from the houses lying on the pier to the topmost round of the topmost ladder, that one might have fancied it was out a-bird's-nesting, and was (as indeed it was) a wonderful climber.' Dickens had visited Clovelly with Wilkie Collins in November 1860. The portrait, therefore, was drawn from life.

He became familiar with Cornwall in the autumn of 1842, shortly after his return from America, when with Forster, Maclise, and Clarkson Stanfield he spent three glorious weeks there. 'I never laughed in all my life as I did on this journey,' he told his American friend, Professor Felton. 'It would have done you good to hear me. I was choking, and gasping, and bursting the buckle off the back of my stock, all the way. . . . Seriously, I do believe there never was such a trip. And they made such sketches, those two men, in the most romantic of our halting-places, that you would have sworn we had the Spirit of Beauty with us,

as well as the Spirit of Fun.' Thackeray gave us a pen-and-ink sketch of these four distinguished gentlemen, doing the sights of Cornwall in top hats.

After so exhilarating an experience as this, followed by the multitude of impressions collected along the Cornish coast, particularly at Tintagel, St. Michael's Mount, and Land's End, where the party witnessed a glorious sunset, Dickens could not fail to endeavour to turn his experiences to good account in print. But for some reason he failed to do so. The book into which he intended to distil his impressions of Cornwall was *Martin Chuzzlewit*; but books have a way of mastering their authors, and that seems to have happened here. So the lighthouse on the Cornshire rock had to be abandoned in favour of a Wiltshire village forge, and the only bit of Cornwall that found its way into the novels is the remote part of the district of St. Just-in-Penwith referred to by the third of the spirits in *A Christmas Carol*, who takes Scrooge across the Cornish moors to Land's End and thence to the old Longships Lighthouse.

' "What place is this?" asked Scrooge.

' "A place where miners live, who labour in the bowels of the earth," returned the Spirit. "But they know me. See!"

' A light shone from the window of a hut, and swiftly they advanced towards it. Passing through the wall of mud and stone, they found a cheerful company assembled round a glowing fire. An old, old man and woman, with their children and their children's children, and another generation beyond that, all decked out gaily in their holiday attire. The old man, in a voice that seldom rose above the howling of the wind upon the barren waste, was singing them a Christmas song; it had been a very old song when he was a boy, and from time to time they all joined in the chorus.'

The same district was again in his mind in 1855 when he wrote *The Holly Tree Inn* for the Christmas number of *Household Words*. Recalling his most vivid experiences of friendly inns he had known in different parts of the world he remembered Cornwall and the scene at a miners' feast

there, with a wild crowd dancing by torchlight outside the alehouse, which was 'full, and twenty times full'. It was so full that only the horse could be accommodated, and the four friends were put up at the house of a chair-maker who was so good at his calling that he had no chairs left for the use of his own household, which meant that everyone had to perch on mere frames, without any seats to them. Nothing of this got into *Martin Chuzzlewit*, where the only mention of Cornwall is a reference to 'men of large stature bred in the mining districts of Cornwall'.

But if he did not recreate the Cornish scene in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, he did instil into the book something of the holiday mood of that carefree autumn in the West Country, whose contrast to the world of London was a challenge to him. He had mastered the art of recreating London in his novels. He knew the precise word and image to give the touch of reality to every pub and squalid slum, every street lamp and alley, that he needed for his plots. In *Martin Chuzzlewit* he tried his hand at the country. No other novel by Dickens has so many rural scenes in it. In accordance with his usual custom he sets his scene at once, and in the second chapter we are introduced to the 'little Wiltshire village, within an easy journey of the fair old town of Salisbury' on the kind of autumn day it must have been when the four friends went down into Cornwall in 1842. For a time the setting sun shed its bright autumnal glory upon all that caught it, then 'the light was all withdrawn; the shining church turned cold and dark; the stream forgot to smile; the birds were silent; and the gloom of winter dwelt on everything'. After the general mood has been evoked in this way its particular spirit is created in the description of the forge with the wind frolicking among the dead leaves. The village he has in mind is believed by some to be Amesbury, others suggest Alderbury—on the strength of its having a Green Dragon Inn, and those of a third school favour Winterslow. It is the old story. If it helps the reader to have Amesbury, or Alderbury, or Winterslow, or any other village within easy reach of Salisbury in mind while

he thinks of Tom Pinch driving into Salisbury and hearing from Mark Tapley that he was 'going to leave the Dragon', no one will be any the worse for the indulgence. With Dickens himself the picture was composite, as it was with so many of his village-pictures. For all that, Dickensians will continue to argue about the rival merits of the various claimants to the end of time, and Wiltshire men will continue to be as spirited in the defence of their own particular favourite as I am in defence of the King's Head, Chigwell, as the Maypole Inn of *Barnaby Rudge*, or of Loughton Hall as the Warren. It may be absurd to be so, but Dickensians are made that way.

There are two vital factors in this problem of which was Pecksniff's village, the Blue Dragon inn and the coach road in question, and they are two matters on which a man is entitled to become excited. Amesbury has a George inn, which is in all respects worthy of recognition as the Blue Dragon of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. That the name is wrong is not a serious matter. Indeed what more likely than that the George should suggest the Dragon? But there are two important objections to the George at Amesbury. It is wrong in relation to the coach route. This will be dealt with in a moment. And it is too respectable and commodious for the needs of the story. The Blue Dragon of *Martin Chuzzlewit* is thrice referred to as an ale-house, which the George can never have been. Moreover it is described as 'an ale-house observe; a common, paltry, low-minded, clodhopping, pipe-smoking ale-house'. The Green Dragon at Alderbury may have answered that description a century ago, and in other respects is reasonably suitable, although hardly large enough. But it is three miles out of Salisbury on the Southampton, not the London, road. That it has a house that might well have been Pecksniff's home is not important. Most villages could qualify on this point. Its main title is in the name and condition of its inn, which is said to have possessed a sign-board similar to the one described by Dickens:

'A faded and an ancient dragon he was; and many a wintry storm of rain, snow, sleet, and hail had changed his

colour from a gaudy blue to a faint lack-lustre shade of grey. But there he hung; rearing in a state of monstrous imbecility on his hind legs; waxing with every month that passed so much more dim and shapeless that as you gazed at him on one side of the sign-board it seemed as if he must be gradually melting through it and coming out upon the other.'

As so many Wiltshire villages had inns or ale-houses that might qualify as the Blue Dragon, and houses that might have provided a dignified setting for Mr. Pecksniff, the most useful clue is the road. Here a good deal turns on the route taken by the 'Quicksilver' coach, as the Devonport Mail was called. Those who have gone into the subject assure us that the 'Quicksilver' changed its route in 1837. Before that date it ran by way of Andover and Salisbury. This means that it did not go through Amesbury, which was then on the route of the 'Telegraph'. But in 1837 the 'Quicksilver' adopted the Amesbury-Ilminster route. As *Martin Chuzzlewit* is a backward-glancing book, the coach in question might have taken either course, and Amesbury might therefore be visited; but if Amesbury is gained Salisbury is lost, and surely Chapter XXXVI makes it clear that Salisbury was the place of call. If this is accepted then the most likely village for the Blue Dragon is neither Amesbury nor Alderbury, but Winterslow, because when the 'Quicksilver' ran through Salisbury it proceeded to Andover by way of Winterslow Hut, Middle Wallop, and Little Anne. A former editor of *Wiltshire Notes and Queries*, a man knowledgeable in the topography of the county, thought that a very strong case could be made out for Winterslow, in which case the Lion's Head would be the Blue Dragon. Personally I agree with him. One of the difficult points for those who maintain that Amesbury is the village of the Blue Dragon is the passage in Chapter XLII describing the journey from London to Pecksniff's house running, 'They (Jonas and Tigg) agreed that they would go to Salisbury, and would cross to Mr. Pecksniff's in the morning'. If Mr. Pecksniff's house was at Amesbury it was on the direct

route of a London coach. There would have been no sense in going round by Salisbury to reach it, although they might have done so if Mr. Pecksniff's house was at Alderbury.

But to anyone other than a Wiltshire man these are mere quibbles. What most of us value in the descriptive passages of *Martin Chuzzlewit* are those charming vignettes that come back into the mind whenever the book is mentioned. Personally, I think first of that 'fresh, frosty morning, when hope runs cheerily through the veins with the brisk blood', and that essentially autumnal picture as 'from cottage chimneys smoke went streaming up high, high, as if the earth had lost its grossness, being so fair, and must not be oppressed by heavy vapour'. These things may not be Dickens at his best; but they are Dickens for all that, and characteristically so. Think, for example, of Martin's walk with Tom, at John Westlock's invitation, to the dinner at the White Hart: 'Look round and round upon this bare, bleak plain, and see even here, upon a winter's day, how beautiful the shadows are! Alas! it is the nature of their kind to be so. The loveliest things in life, Tom, are but shadows; and they come and go, and change and fade away as rapidly as these!' Always, in Dickens, we have the play of light and shade in some form. So, having bathed the Wiltshire countryside with golden light it was inevitable that he should introduce the grey by way of contrast. This he does in the passage describing how Martin leaves Pecksniff to go towards London in rain which 'streamed from every twig and bramble in the hedge, made little gullies in the path, ran down a hundred channels in the road, and punched innumerable holes in the face of every pond and gutter'.

The memorable town scenes in *Martin Chuzzlewit* are in Salisbury, a city sedate enough for most tastes; but which Tom Pinch regarded as a dissipated, harum-scarum sort of place. After handing his horse to the ostler he went out into the streets 'with a vague and not unpleasant idea' that he was acting in a daring and somewhat rakish manner in doing so. The inn described was probably the Ox, which stood in Ox Row, facing the Market Place, until the licence

was withdrawn in 1924, not, as some have said, the George, which was not an inn at the time when Dickens wrote, and even if it had been its situation in the comparatively quiet High Street leading to the Cathedral Close would rule it out, because undoubtedly the inn Dickens had in mind was in the Market Place. Nowhere else would there have been so many farmers and their customers standing about. 'There were young farmers and old farmers, with smock frocks, brown great-coats, drab great-coats, red worsted comforters, leather leggings, wonderful-shaped hats, hunting-whips, and rough sticks, standing about in groups or talking noisily together on tavern steps, or paying and receiving huge amounts of greasy wealth with the assistance of such bulky pocket-books, that when they were in their pockets it was apoplexy to get them out, and when they were out spasms to get them in again. Also there were farmers' wives in beaver bonnets and red cloaks, riding shaggy horses purged of all earthly passions, who went soberly into all manner of places without desiring to know why, and who, if required, would have stood stock-still in a china shop with a complete dinner service at each hoof. Also a great many dogs that were strongly interested in the state of the market and the bargains of their masters; and a great confusion of tongues, both brute and human.' Tom himself walked about among the booths and marvelled at the wares displayed, eventually buying a seven-bladed knife, not one of which would cut.

But there was also the cathedral at Salisbury, and Tom, being of a musical turn and no mean performer on the organ, made his way towards it, proud of the fact that the cathedral organist's assistant was a friend of his. In the fifth chapter of the story we are shown the cathedral. 'The yellow light that streamed in through the ancient windows in the choir was mingled with a murky red. As the grand tones resounded through the church, they seemed to Tom to find an echo in the depth of every ancient tomb, no less than in the deep mystery of his own.' For an unknown reason, which I for one cannot believe was lack of observation, Dickens refers to the towers of the cathedral, which is,

of course, famous for its spire and has no unsurmounted towers.

When the farmers and their wives had driven out of the market place and Salisbury was left to its peaceful humdrum life Tom sat down in the sanded parlour of his tavern to 'a well-cooked steak and smoking hot potatoes'.

There was one power in the story that 'cared no more for Salisbury than if it had been a hamlet'. This was the coach itself, which 'rattled noisily through the best streets, defied the cathedral, took the worst corners sharpest, went cutting in everywhere, making everything get out of it way; and spun along the open country road, blowing a lively defiance out of its key-bugle, as its last glad parting legacy'. This particular journey to London is one of the best—perhaps actually the best—of Dickens's drives:

'It was a charming evening. Mild and bright. And even with the weight upon his mind which arose out of the immensity and uncertainty of London, Tom could not resist the captivating sense of rapid motion through the pleasant air. The four greys skimmed along, as if they liked it quite as well as Tom did, the bugle was in as high spirits as the greys, the coachman chimed in sometimes with his voice; the wheels hummed cheerfully in unison, the brass work on the harness was an orchestra of little bells; and thus, as they went clinking, jingling, rattling smoothly on, the whole concern, from the buckle of the leaders' coupling rein to the handle of the hind boot, was one great instrument of music. . . . Yoho, past hedges, gates, and trees, past cottages and barns, and people going home from work.'

If Dickens got some of the word-painting in *Martin Chuzzlewit* by looking over the shoulders of his artist friends as they painted the Cornish scene that autumn, he got the coach journey and the glowing hospitality of the inns out of his own racing blood and generous heart. Above all *Martin Chuzzlewit* is a home-coming book. It is the novel he wrote on returning to his beloved England from the unsuccessful American trip.

CHAPTER X

THE MIDLANDS

THE reason for Mr. Pickwick's venture into the Midlands was a resolve to visit Mr. Winkle senior and straighten out the love-affair of Miss Allen and the younger Winkle. As he was accompanied on the journey by Bob Sawyer and Sam Weller the milestones between Bristol and Tewkesbury sped by as merrily as the punctuation marks in a well-told story, and if later the tale of their travel did begin to flag, and all journeys became wearisome sooner or later in Dickensian days, Mr. Pickwick slept soundly until the lurching coach pulled up suddenly and restored him to consciousness with a jolt. Little can Dickens have suspected how much that journey would mean to the Midland shires. Dull as the more heavily industrialized parts may appear to us now, they still share the glow that continues to illumine every place mentioned in *Pickwick*, and such places as Coventry and Towcester, as well as Birmingham, are justifiably proud of their connection with the distinguished gentleman who visited them in 1827. At Towcester we are reminded that the inn, which since 1831 has been called the Pomfret Arms, was formerly the Saracen's Head, the scene of the noisy quarrel between Mr. Pott of the *Eatanswill Gazette* and Mr. Slurk of the *Independent*. Otherwise it was friendly enough. 'The candles were brought, the fire was stirred up, and a fresh log of wood thrown on. In ten minutes' time, a waiter was laying the cloth for dinner.' What could have been friendlier than that? The weather was not so cheering. At Coventry the party made their first stop on the journey from Birmingham to London in conditions so wretched that when they changed horses in the yard of an unnamed inn—probably the Castle—the ostler could not be recognized through the steam that rose

from the horses' backs. But in thinking of Coventry we remember that it was between there and Towcester that Sam Weller entertained the party with his dissertation on postboys and donkeys—'Never . . . see a dead postboy, did you? . . . No nor never vill; and there's another thing that no man never saw, and that's a dead donkey.'

The first stop on the journey from Bristol to Birmingham was the Bell Inn, Berkeley Heath, where bottled ale and Madeira were promptly disposed of to fortify the party against the fatigue of the road ahead. Their next stop was at the Hop Pole, Tewkesbury, where they dined, and it was after this particular meal that Mr. Pickwick and Ben Allen slept for thirty miles while Bob Sawyer and Sam Weller sang duets in the seat behind. Whether the music was intended to sustain their slumbers or subdue their snores we do not know; but at all events it kept everyone happy, and by the time they reached Birmingham it was already dusk, which made the character of the landscape appropriate to the mood of the travellers.

'The straggling cottages by the roadside, the dingy hue of every object visible, the murky atmosphere, the paths of cinders and brick-dust, the deep red glow of furnace fires in the distance, the volumes of dense smoke issuing heavily forth from high toppling chimneys, blackening and obscuring everything around; the glare of distant lights, the ponderous waggons which toiled along the road, laden with flashing rods of iron, or piled with heavy goods—all betoken their rapid approach to the great working town of Birmingham.'

But as they entered the city the scene changed for the better. The handsome and well-lighted shops, as well as the prospect of comfort awaiting them at the Old Royal Hotel, roused their spirits for the interview with Mr. Winkle senior, who turned out to be a wharfinger living in 'an old red-brick house with three steps before the door, and a brass plate upon it, bearing in fat Roman capitals, the words, "MR. WINKLE"'. The steps were very white, and the bricks were very red, and the house was very clean; and here stood Mr. Pickwick, Mr. Benjamin Allen, and Mr. Bob Sawyer, as

the clock struck ten.' A house no longer standing, which stood at the corner of Easy Row and Edmund Street, used to be pointed out as Mr. Winkle's; but as it had six steps to the front door, instead of the number given in the book, the owner of No. 11, which had the correct number of steps, promptly put in a claim when the more imposing house disappeared. In fact neither house can be proved authentic, because there is no evidence to show that Dickens had ever so much as been in Birmingham when he wrote about the city in *Pickwick*. But any deficiencies in his knowledge of the Midlands were made good soon afterwards. In 1838 he took a couple of holidays in the company of his illustrator, Hablot K. Browne, or 'Phiz', the second of which was spent in Wales and the Midlands, where he accumulated local colour for *The Old Curiosity Shop*, written soon afterwards, and *Dombey and Son*, published in 1848—that is to say, ten years later.

He was able to turn these 1838 experiences to good account in *Dombey and Son* because that year he kept a diary, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It was actually started on New Year's Day and abandoned a few days later with the melancholy footnote: 'Here ends this brief attempt at a diary. I grow sad over this checking off my days, and can't do it.' But it was restarted for the tour. He and 'Phiz' left the Coach Office near Hungerford Street on Monday, 29 October, 1838, and had a cold but pleasant ride to Leamington, where they stayed at the Copp's, an excellent inn that provided them with 'a roaring fire, an elegant dinner, a snug room, and capital beds'. So it was here, when the time came, that Mr. Dombey was allowed to meet the lady who became his second wife. Unfortunately Copp's Royal Hotel was demolished a few years later.

In *Dombey and Son* the spirit of Victorian Leamington is charmingly evoked, with the major swaggering up and down the walks, perusing the subscription books to see who is staying at the spa, and subjecting himself to the admiring gaze of the elderly spinsters and windows, to whom he paid court, while his servant stood by, or walked dis-

creetly behind carrying his greatcoat, umbrella, and camp-stool. Here, walking arm-in-arm, the major and Mr. Dombey met the lady who is described as being no longer young, but still blooming, accompanied by the young lady who carried a gossamer parasol with a nonchalant air, and maintained the kind of haughty expression so much admired at the time.

“My dearest Edith!” drawled the lady in the chair, “Major Bagstock.”

‘The major no sooner heard the voice than he relinquished Mr. Dombey’s arm, darted forward, took the hand of the lady in the chair and pressed it to his lips. With no less gallantry, the major folded both his gloves upon his heart, and bowed low to the other lady. And now, the chair having stopped, the motive power became visible in the shape of a flushed page pushing behind, who seemed to have in part outgrown and in part outpushed his strength; for when he stood upright he was tall, and wan, and thin, and his plight appeared the more forlorn from his having injured the shape of his hat, by butting at the carriage with his head to urge it forward, as is sometimes done by elephants in oriental countries.’

From Leamington Dickens and ‘Phiz’ drove in a post-chaise to Kenilworth, with which both were enraptured, and paid their humble respects to the newly restored Warwick Castle. And so, of course, did Mr. Dombey and the major. Having finished breakfast, they joined the two ladies in a well-appointed barouche, while the native and the wan page mounted the box, and Mr. Carker, on horseback, brought up the rear; and so this elegant equipage proceeded along its course through the undulating countryside encompassed by all the sights and sounds of high summer.

On reaching the castle Mrs. Skewton took possession of the major and Mr. Carker, demanding an arm from each, while Mr. Dombey, with befitting solemnity of mien, escorted Edith.

‘Those darling bygone times, Mr. Carker,’ drawled Cleopatra, ‘with their delicious fortresses, and their dear old dungeons, and their delightful places of torture, and

their romantic vengeance, and their picturesque assaults and sieges, and everything that makes life truly charming! How dreadfully we have degenerated!

Mrs. Skewton had related how her cousin, Lord Feenix, had visited the castle fifty times, and if he came again the following day that would be his fifty-second visit.

Such was the society of Leamington in the middle of the nineteenth century. Camden, at the end of the sixteenth, had written of the excellence of its waters; but at the beginning of the nineteenth it was still Leamington Priors, so called from its connection with the Priory. The spa was not yet established. But it rose rapidly in public favour, particularly after the visit of the Prince Regent in 1819, after which Williams' Royal Hotel became the Regent. We get an idea of its popularity in the middle of the century from the description of the expensive apartments engaged by the Honourable Mrs. Skewton herself. Her own bedroom, we learn, was so small that when she lay in bed her head was at the window and her feet at the fire-place, while her maid 'was obliged to writhe in and out of the door' of her closet 'like a beautiful serpent'. Withers, the wan page, could not be accommodated in the same house, and slept 'under the tiles at a neighbouring milk shop.'

From Leamington Dickens and 'Phiz' went on to Stratford-upon-Avon for the second night of their tour, and in consequence Stratford was worked into *Nicholas Nickleby* as the place where Mrs. Nickleby and her husband had lodgings. 'Soon after I was married,' she says, 'I went to Stratford . . . and after we had seen Shakespeare's tomb and birthplace, we went back to the inn there, where we slept that night, and I recollect that all night long I dreamt of nothing but a black gentleman, at full length, in plaster of Paris, with a lay down collar tied with two tassels, leaning against a post and thinking, and when I woke in the morning and described him to Mr. Nickleby, he said it was Shakespeare just as he had been when he was alive, which was very curious indeed.' Ten years later Dickens had a good deal to do with the purchase of Shakespeare's

birthplace, contributing some of the proceeds of his tour as a strolling player to this object. In 1852 he signed the Visitors Book at the birthplace. In 1848 he stayed at the Red Horse.

The original intention on leaving Stratford-upon-Avon in the 1838 tour was to go on to Bridgnorth; but in this Dickens and 'Phiz' were frustrated by lack of a coach that way. They were therefore obliged to reach Shrewsbury and Chester by way of Birmingham and Wolverhampton, 'starting at eight o'clock through a cold wet fog, and travelling when the day had cleared up, through miles of cinder-paths, and blazing furnaces, and roaring steam engines, and such a mass of dirt, gloom and misery as I never before witnessed.' The journey was not inspiring in the early stages. It served, however, to provide the route for Little Nell and her grandfather in their flight from the scoundrel Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and this is worth noting in trying to determine which of the several routes suggested by Dickens topographers is the most probable. So, much as I should like to believe that they travelled, as Rimmer suggests, out of East London to the 'pert cottages with garden plots' and box-wood borders, which he believes were in Essex, I cannot. It is true that in many of the villages on the Essex border public-houses with bowling-greens and tea-gardens were numerous, and that immediately after leaving the city, it was then usual to see summer-houses made out of old boats, 'grottoed at the stems with toad-stools or tight-sticking snail-shells' in the cottage gardens of the old marshland villages. These would undoubtedly appeal to Dickens, but he transferred them to a new locality. According to Rimmer, Little Nell and her grandfather spent the first night at Ongar, and from there went on to Thaxted or Saffron Walden for Newmarket Races. After that they are believed to have turned east into Suffolk. These things, I say, I would gladly believe, because I share Dickens's affection for the eastern counties; but I am quite sure they followed a different route.

Mr. Dexter has the convincing route. According to him

the first day's journey took them out of London by way of Holborn, King's Cross, Camden Town, Hampstead, Cricklewood, and Ealing to Uxbridge, where they 'slept the night at a small cottage where beds were let to travellers'. The second day's journey took them by way of Amersham and Wendover to Aylesbury. The third by Winslow to Buckingham, which makes Banbury the town where the races were to begin next day. Warmington would then be the village where they met the kind schoolmaster and stayed two nights. On the seventh day they would reach Warwick, where they stayed several weeks with Mrs. Jarley. They were now well and truly in the Midlands, and on the route followed by Dickens and 'Phiz' in 1838. In the second part of the journey, after sleeping on a barge the first night, they travelled through Birmingham—'a large manufacturing town', where they slept the second night—to Wolverhampton, the place where Little Nell fainted in the street. Dickens himself visited Wolverhampton several times. The most memorable visit was in the winter of 1853, from which came the article, *Fire and Snow*, reprinted from *Household Words* of 21 January, 1854, in *Miscellaneous Papers*. This is how he saw the town:

'Snow, wind, ice, and Wolverhampton—all together. No carriage at the station, everything snowed up. So much the better. The Swan will take us under its warm wing, walking or riding. Where is the Swan's nest? In the market-place. So much the better yet, for it is market-day, and there will be something to see from the Swan's nest.

'Up the streets of Wolverhampton, where the doctor's bright door-plate is dimmed as if Old Winter's breath were on it, and the lawyer's office window is appropriately misty, to the market-place; where we find a cheerful bustle and plenty of people—for the most part pretending not to like the snow, but liking it very much, as people generally do.'

Again we have to record a casualty. The Swan, which stood at the corner of Queen Square, was replaced on its ancient site by a branch of Lloyds Bank in 1878, and its sign removed to the Peacock in Snow Hill.

The pathetic episode of Little Nell's death, so beloved of Victorian readers, took place in the noble church at Tong, sometimes described as the 'Westminster Abbey of the Midlands', which Dickens and 'Phiz' would pass on their way to Shrewsbury. So, at least, most of us believe, and on evidence confirmed by the late Archdeacon Lloyd, who put it on record that Dickens told him personally that Tong was the church he had in mind when describing the death of Little Nell. It is only fair, however, to say that not one of these places is actually named by Dickens, and in consequence eminent Dickensians, such as Percy FitzGerald have suggested their own alternatives. FitzGerald himself, for example, believed that Coventry, not Warwick, was the town in which Mrs. Jarley exhibited the waxworks the night after meeting Little Nell and her grandfather; but most of us follow Mr. Dexter in rejecting this particular identification. And our reason for doing so is based on an article contributed to the *Coventry Herald* of 15 December, 1922, by a former librarian of Coventry, Mr. Nowell, who stated categorically that notwithstanding the fact that one of the city's two ancient gateways was known as Little Nell's Gateway, the claim could not be upheld. But, lest the people of Coventry should feel slighted, it is right to add that their forbears stood high in the novelist's esteem. It was at Coventry in 1858 that he was the guest of the evening at a public dinner, and received a gold repeater watch in commemoration of his reading of the *Christmas Carol* in aid of Coventry Institute. But to revert to the route followed by Little Nell and her grandfather, there is another scrap of real evidence in a letter to Forster, with whom he visited the Midlands in the April of the year in which *The Old Curiosity Shop* was written, where he says: 'You will recognize a description of the road we travelled between Birmingham and Wolverhampton.'

At Shrewsbury Dickens and 'Phiz' stayed at the Lion, the grand old coaching inn of the Holyhead road, now known to tourists for the excellence of its fare, and to students of architecture for its beautiful Adam ballroom.

The rooms occupied by Dickens and his friend were in what was then an annexe. In a letter to his daughter he says of them: 'We have the strangest little rooms. . . . The windows bulge out over the street as if they were little stern windows of a ship. And a door opens out of the sitting-room on to a little open gallery, with plants in it, where one leans over a queer old rail.' And that is how we still see it!

They stayed one night only in Shrewsbury, then went on to Llangollen, where they put up at the Hand Hotel, before going on to Bangor and Capel Curig, returning to England at Chester.

There are incidental references to the Midlands in several of the novels. The man from Shropshire, who was regarded as the 'best joke of the Courts of Chancery', may have been encountered in these parts. It is thought that Dunstable was probably in Dickens's mind when he wanted a refuge for Barnaby and his mother in Chapter XLV of *Barnaby Rudge*. He describes the place as 'a small English country town, the inhabitants of which supported themselves by the labour of their hands in plaiting and preparing straw for those who made bonnets and other articles of dress and ornaments from that material'. Barnaby and his mother found for themselves a hut on the outskirts of the town, where they were discovered by the blind man, Stagg.

One of the most difficult places to identify is the town from which *Oliver Twist* tramped to London. Some say it was Peterborough, others Grantham. So far as I can see there is no way of determining where it was. *Bleak House*, on the other hand, has scenes that clearly belong to the Midlands and can readily be identified, although the house that gave the book its title has not, in fact, been established beyond reasonable doubt, to use a term Dickens knew well. We are told that it was near St. Albans and afforded a view of the cathedral. On the strength of this hint a house called Gombards is frequently said to be the one, although the more scrupulous may think that if Dickens himself had intended this to be the house he would have said in, rather than near, St. Albans. Another claimant is Great Nast

Hyde, just off the main road from St. Albans to Hatfield, which is a large seventeenth-century house standing at the end of an avenue of trees, and for once has the correct number of gables. But although Dickens was familiar with the St. Albans neighbourhood there is nothing to show that he knew this particular house. His visit to St. Albans in search of local colour—when he stayed at the Queen's Hotel—was actually two months after the detailed description of the house in Part II had appeared in print. This, however, is not conclusive. There are so many references to the Hatfield and St. Albans neighbourhood in Dickens that he was quite obviously familiar with it from youth. The *Morning Chronicle* of 3 December, 1835, has an account by Dickens of the great fire at Hatfield House in which the Marchioness of Salisbury lost her life. From his letters we learn that two days previously he had caught the Leicester coach at 8 a.m., and after breakfasting at Barnet had, with a reporter's impatience to be on the spot, hired a gig and whipped his horse to a gallop along the Great North Road as far as Hatfield, where, after getting his story, he had put up for the night at the Salisbury Arms.

It was at the Eight Bells, Hatfield, that Bill Sikes encountered the pedlar with the specific for removing stains. And, incidentally, Bill Sikes found refuge in a shed near three poplars. Now poplars are not common in the Hatfield-St. Albans country; but there are poplars near Great Nast Hyde. There is also a pond nearby in which Bill might well have tried to drown his dog.

The third claim for the honour of being the original of Bleak House is the Reverend H. Bodel Smith's on behalf of Bleak Hall, Kensworth, which again has three gables, is situated on an eminence, and is approached by a long drive. In addition it has a brickfield near. The objection that it is too far away might not count for much in view of Dickens's habit of moving his buildings as the plot required. But what does rule it out is the fact that when the novel was written it consisted of three cottages and had neither the gables nor the name! These were conferred upon it when

it was completely transformed in the summer of 1852, after the earlier parts of *Bleak House* had appeared.¹

The Mansion in *Bleak House* about which no one is in doubt is Chesney Wold, the home of the Dedlocks, the original of which was Rockingham Castle, the home of the Watsons, with whom Dickens spent several holidays, and at least one festive Christmas. During these visits he joined in private theatricals, explored the park and village, with its steep ascent to the Dedlock Arms, actually the Sondes Arms, and it was in the keeper's lodge here that Lady Dedlock, Esther, and Mr. Jarndyce sheltered from the thunderstorm. The ghost's walk is here, the sundial, the stable clock, and Mr. Tulkinghorn's room in the Tower, with the leads he walked on.

As usual, there are a few minor discrepancies. The church, for example, is nearer the castle than the book suggests. It is situated in the park, and reached from the village street by a pathway—supposed to be the one that roused the ire of Mr. Boythorn, who 'lived in a pretty house, formerly the parsonage-house'. It was so near the castle that Lady Dedlock would never have driven to church, as she is said to have done, and the disputes between Mr. Boythorn, whose prototype was the quarrelsome Walter Savage Landor, and Sir Leicester Dedlock about rights of way become quite absurd.

Dickens first met the Hon. Richard Watson and his wife during a holiday in 1848. Five years later he wrote to Mrs. Watson: 'In some of the description of Chesney Wold, I have taken many bits, chiefly about trees and shadows, from observations made at Rockingham. I wonder whether you have ever thought so.' But there were more than pictorial effects to be noted about his description of Chesney Wold. It is one more example of his remarkable gift for conveying atmosphere through the particularities of buildings and landscape. All that a social historian could say in twenty pages about the decadence of the Georgian aristocracy is conveyed in the passage: 'The waters are out in

¹ *The Dickensian*, XV, 197; XVI, 40.

Lincolnshire. An arch of the bridge in the park has been sapped and sopped away. The adjacent low-lying ground, for half a mile in breadth, is a stagnant river, with melancholy trees for islands in it. . . . On Sunday, the little church in the park is mouldy; the oaken pulpit breaks out in a cold sweat; and there is general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves.'

The same kind of decay is described at Mr. Haredale's house in *Barnaby Rudge*. Indeed, there can hardly be a single novel in which Dickens does not describe in detail at least one house in the last stages of dilapidation and decay, and this applies to small houses as well as large. If he is to be believed, the appalling condition of property today, as described by the more fervid advocates for a revision of the Rent Restriction Acts, are security itself in comparison with the buildings described in Dickens. But at Chesney Wold we were witnessing not so much the decay of property as of people.

CHAPTER XI

NORTH WITH DICKENS AND NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

MANCHESTER and Liverpool were better known to Dickens than any other great industrial centres outside London. As a young man he had visited them for pleasure—yes, pleasure! And later, in the frenzied crusading tours of his last years, he returned to them repeatedly because nowhere else could he be sure of such tumultuous welcomes and such solid returns in hard cash. Liverpool, he visited during the 1838 holiday already referred to, and afterwards was in the habit of arranging to spend the night at the Adelphi Hotel as often as possible during his northern reading tours. For all that, Liverpool does not figure in the novels except as a place of embarkation, although in one of *The Uncommercial Traveller* papers there is a pen-picture of the Liverpool slums.

His Manchester connections were more intimate. This great industrial mart was endeared to him as the home of his favourite sister, Fanny, who settled there as the wife of a teacher of music; and he reflected this personal warmth by endearing it to his readers as the home of the Cheeryble Brothers, the benevolent Manchester business men to whom he was introduced by Harrison Ainsworth's friend, Gilbert Winter, at his home, the Stocks, Cheetham Hill. Of no other characters in Dickens are the prototypes more reliably authenticated. Indeed, Dickens himself says: 'The Brothers Cheeryble live . . . their liberal charity, their singleness of heart, their noble nature and their unbounded benevolence, are no creatures of the author's brain.' And when one of them died in 1842 he wrote from America: 'One of the noble hearts who sat for the Cheeryble Brothers, is dead. If I had been in England, I would certainly have gone into

mourning for the loss of such a glorious life.' Their real name was Grant. They lived and had their factory at Ramsbottom; their warehouse was in Cannon Street, Manchester.

But the benevolence of the Cheeryble Brothers did not deceive him as to the immediate effect of mechanization on the rich as well as the poor. When he met the Grants he had, in fact, gone into Lancashire for the express purpose of seeing the inside of a cotton mill, and was spending three days there with Forster, after arriving with a letter of introduction from Harrison Ainsworth to James Crossley, one of the great figures of nineteenth-century Manchester. Writing to his friend FitzGerald about this visit, he said: 'I went to Manchester and saw the *worst* cotton mill and then I saw the *best*. *Ex uno disce omnes*. There was no great difference between them. I was obliged to come back suddenly on some matters connected with the publication of *Oliver Twist*. . . . On the eleventh of next month I am going down again only for three days, and then into the enemy's camp and the very headquarters of the Factory System advocates. I fear I shall have very little opportunity of looking about me, but I shall be happy to avail myself of any introduction from Lord Ashley which in the course of an hour or so would enable me to make any fresh observations. . . . So far as seeing goes, I have seen enough for my purpose, and what I have seen has astonished and disgusted me beyond all measure. I mean to strike the heaviest blow in my power for those unfortunate creatures, but whether I shall do so in *Nickleby* or wait some other opportunity I have not yet determined.' From this it is evident that he was already in sympathy with Lord Shaftesbury's campaign on behalf of the factory children, and was determined to enter the lists himself.

Ironical as it may appear to those who are not personally acquainted with the North, he had not gone to Manchester to fight the enemy there, but to enlist its people in support of wiser and more charitable counsels. Even then Manchester was kinder on the whole than its neighbours,

largely because it was not itself so much a manufacturing as a warehousing town, which meant that Manchester handled the money and could afford to be generous. Whether we like the idea or not, money *can* buy freedom of thought. It was in the factory towns between Manchester and Oldham that the struggle for survival was so grim and soul-destroying. Manchester itself never forgot the importance of culture and education. In 1843 Dickens presided at a meeting organized to raise funds for the Manchester Athenaeum; in 1847 he was there with his amateur players to raise funds for necessitous men of letters; in 1848 he and his players were there again, this time in aid of the fund for the purchase of Shakespeare's birthplace at Stratford-upon-Avon. He was in Manchester twice in support of charitable objects in 1852, and so profitably that he wrote that its people were 'the greatest in the world'. There was a free reading of *A Christmas Carol* in the Free Trade Hall to a packed audience in 1857, and several enthusiastic visits during the 'sixties—right up to the final appearance on 22 March, 1869, when he came as a broken man.

No one knew the value of money better than Dickens. He had suffered too much from the lack of it to believe that it didn't matter. If anything he over-emphasized its importance. Yet he was never fooled by the generosity of his Manchester friends. He had no illusions as to how the money that poured through his agent's hands was come by, and in *Hard Times*, a book of far greater merit than most of his critics have recognized, he exposed the seamy side of Lancashire life, with those two ogres, Gradgrind and Bounderby—so different from the Cheeryble Brothers—as the presiding spirits. *Hard Times* is a grim story. Thomas Gradgrind, a hard-headed business man who prides himself on being 'eminently practical' in all his dealings, believes in facts and statistics to the exclusion of everything else. Imagination is self-deception, loving-kindness humbug. Applying this philosophy to the lives of his children, he compels his daughter to marry the rascal Bounderby, who

is thirty years older than herself but has plenty of money, with the result that he involves her in misery which finally comes home to himself, while his son, into whom he has inculcated his own get-rich-quick philosophy, robs his employer's bank, and after an unsuccessful attempt to put the blame on a poor working-man is hustled out of the country in a feeble attempt to save the family credit. By this time Gradgrind is broken, and obliged to admit that his system has failed to work. Another sordid substitute for romance in the book is provided by the miserable weaver, Stephen Blackpool, who has been deserted and humiliated by a drunken wife; yet is denounced as a rascal by the hypocrite Bounderby, whom he consults about obtaining a divorce and marrying the brave girl Rachel, who is ready to make a home for him.

The tale, then, is as much a tract for the times as a dramatization of the conflict between the hard, uncompromising money-changers on the one hand, and the happy-go-lucky people of Sleary's Circus on the other. To the magnates of Coketown, Sleary's people are wastrels, out to trick the factory-hands of their hard-earned wages and lead them down the primrose, or sawdust, path to Perdition.

The precise identity of a town with so little personality as Coketown does not matter much. It was typical of its kind, and the harshness of Dickens's condemnation of the people who built and ran such towns—or ran them until they became the victims of their own creations—was not a whit too stern. What he could not know, but would have been thrilled to know, is that in these very places where the soul-destroying forces of brute industrialism had first been unleashed, personality and humour, however crude, were to triumph over metal and its minions, so that eventually the Slearys were more prosperous than the Gradgrinds.

Coketown, as Dickens describes it, is grim enough; but no more grim than the reality was. And that people could be born and doomed to live the whole of their short and stunted lives in such places without being aware of their

grimness only adds to the pathos. In this smoke-blackened world in which graces were dismissed as vanity, and courtesy was regarded as the prelude to hypocrisy, men had less dignity than animals. They were tools—hands, they were called.

But while Dickens may have had several towns in mind in describing Coketown, we may take it that the place most constantly before his eyes was Preston, a town of dark forebodings for Dickens. Early in 1854, while working on the book, he stayed at the Bull Inn, Preston, during a strike. What he saw cut deep. The strike leader was a man named Mortimer Grimshaw, and no one can doubt that he provided the model for both 'Gruffshaw' of the article *On Strike*, contributed to *Household Words* at this time, and the trade union organizer, Slackbridge, of *Hard Times*. It was only fear of the consequences that made Dickens go out of his way—always a suspicious circumstance—to deny that Coketown was a representation of Preston. He had good reason to add that such an identification would cause, 'as I know by former experience, characters to be fitted on to individuals whom, I never saw or heard of in my life'. In view of the evidence, anyone who believes that denial must be very innocent indeed! Moreover, we read of Coketown: 'It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black, like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours,

with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.' This, we may think, fits Preston.

We get another glimpse of Preston in *George Silverman's Explanation*, where George Silverman, who was born and bred there says: 'My parents were in a miserable condition in life, and my infant home was a cellar in Preston. I recollect the sound of Father's Lancashire clogs on the street pavement above, as being different in my young hearing from the sound of all other clogs; and I recollect that, when Mother came down the cellar-steps, I used tremblingly to speculate on her feet having a good- or ill-tempered look—on her knees—on her waist—until finally her face came into view, and settled the question. From this it will be seen that I was timid, and that the cellar steps were steep, and that the doorway was very low.'

But what Dickensians remember best about Preston is that it was here, in April 1869, that his reading tours ended so abruptly. The previous week he had been taken ill in Chester, but after a week's rest at Blackpool he thought himself fit enough to resume work, so as he was engaged to read in Preston on the 22nd, he moved into the Bull, fully intending to carry out the advertised programme. Dolby, his agent, was jubilant, and Dolby jubilant was a sight for the gods. Mark Twain once described this bluff, bald-headed man as a 'gladsome gorilla'. Every ticket had been sold. The proceeds were nearly £200. But when Dolby went over to the Bull to report the good news he found Dickens with a telegram in his hand, stating that his own doctor was coming up at once. Both knew what this would mean. At five o'clock the doctor arrived and peremptorily forbade the reading. It was a bitter disappointment for Dickens, but he knew that the doctor was right. He had already been warned more than once that the strain of these reading tours was too much for him. He was bound to submit.

Dolby's problem was not so simple. By this time the

banks were closed, and knowing what he did about the Lancashire man's love of 'his bit o' brass', he anticipated angry scenes outside the hall if he was unable to return the people their money promptly. Fortunately, the landlord of the Bull had formerly been a station-master, and knew something about handling crowds. At all costs, he said, the people must be kept back. So he had messages sent to all railway stations within a radius of twenty miles, stating that Mr. Dickens had been taken ill and the reading had therefore been cancelled. At the same time the mayor caused mounted police to be stationed on all the main roads leading into the town, with orders to stop carriages and inform the occupants of the cancellation in similar terms. Meanwhile, Dolby, with the help of several influential citizens, raised as much cash as he could, and he and the mayor stood behind a green baize table in the entrance hall of the Guildhall, ready to deal with the expected demands. To the eternal credit of Preston only £20 was asked for, and instead of the anticipated complaints, 'nothing was heard', says Dolby, 'but words expressive of deep sympathy for Mr. Dickens in his illness'.

It is good to have this generosity of spirit to record of the hard-headed folk of the North because they do not always come out so well in Dickens. He castigated them in *Hard Times*, and in *Nicholas Nickleby* exposed one of the most flagrant scandals of the day, the notorious Yorkshire schools. On the other hand, he never forgot the kindness of his Manchester and Liverpool friends, and was unstinted in his praise of their generosity.

Dickens had first heard of these cruel North-Country schools when, as a child, he sat 'in by-places, near Rochester Castle, with a head full of Partridge, Strap, Tom Pipes, and Sancho Panza'. He resolved that if ever he had power he would do something about them. So on a bitterly cold morning in January 1838 he and 'Phiz' boarded the north-bound coach, and set out on the long journey to Greta Bridge, in the North Riding of Yorkshire, where, they had been informed, some of the most notorious of these schools

were situated. On the morning of 1 February Dickens wrote to his wife:

'My dearest Kate . . . We reached Grantham between 9 and 10 on Tuesday night, and found everything prepared for our reception in the very best Inn I have ever put up at.¹ It is odd enough that an old lady who had been outside all day and came in towards dinner-time turned out to be the mistress of a Yorkshire school returning from a holiday-stay in London. She was a very queer old lady, and shewed us a long letter she was carrying to one of the boys from his father, containing a severe lecture (enforced and aided by many texts from Scripture) *on his refusing to eat boiled meat*. She was very communicative, drank a great deal of brandy and water, and towards evening became insensible, in which state we left her.'

After this the journey was through falls of thick snow, and sometimes, when the road left the long ribbons of drystone walls which bounded it most of the way and took to the moors, there was not even a vestige of a track. But the mail kept on until at eleven o'clock they reached a single gaunt building at what the guard informed them was Greta Bridge, and here, in what Dickens describes as 'a perfect agony of apprehension', these half-frozen travellers dismounted and made their way through the snow to the lighted windows of the inn, where to their great joy they found a blazing fire awaiting them, and after a hot supper and a bottle of mulled port, retired to a couple of capital bedrooms, each with 'a rousing fire half-way up the chimney'. The following morning they came down to a breakfast of Yorkshire pie, beef, ham and eggs, toast, cakes, and heaven knows what besides, after which they set off in a post-chaise for Barnard Castle, where they looked out Richard Barnes,² sometimes said to be the prototype of John Browdie, a local attorney to whom Dickens had a letter of introduction. By any reckoning it was a heartening start to so austere an investigation.

¹ The George, Grantham.

² *The Dickensian*, XI, 296.

In *Nicholas Nickleby* the hostelry at which Squeers and his victims were set down is said to be the George and New Inn. There were, in fact, two inns nearby, one the George, the other the New Inn. The New Inn, which was later converted into a farmhouse called Thorpe Grange, stands near the beautiful bridge, familiar to many who have never seen it as the subject of Cotman's masterpiece. When Dickens was there the New Inn was the posting-house at which travellers alighted. If they wished to stay the night they walked over the bridge, which, incidentally, spans the Greta a little above its junction with the Tees, to the George and stayed there.

The letter he carried to honest John Browdie contained what Dickens described as a 'pious fraud'. It purported to be from a poor widow who was planning to send her boy to a school in the district, seeking advice on which to choose. John Browdie's advice was that 'while there's a harse to hoold in a' Lunnon, or a goother to lie asleep in', the boy should stay where he was. The advice was sound; but apparently there were few people in the Barnard Castle neighbourhood at that time who were honest enough to give it.

These cheap Yorkshire schools, which were for unwanted children, sprang up in the middle of the eighteenth century—or so it seems. At all events the earliest advertisement so far traced appeared in the *London Advertiser* in September 1749. By the end of the century there were several advertisements appearing regularly, and all drawing attention to the same low fees of twenty guineas a year, together with—and this is the point—*no vacations*, which meant that for twenty guineas a year an unwanted child could be packed off to Yorkshire and forgotten. There were four such academies in the village of Bowes itself, and in the eighteen-twenties and -thirties about twenty altogether in this sparseley populated region with Barnard Castle as its market town, with their masters travelling up to London once or twice a year to pick up the victims.

While making his enquiries Dickens put up at the King's Head, Barnard Castle, where, incidentally, he noticed

the signboard: HUMPHREYS, CLOCKMAKER, which gave him the title for his next work, *Master Humphrey's Clock*. There he was advised to drive over to Bowes, where he baited, no doubt, at the Unicorn, formerly the George, one of the three or four most important posting-houses on the main road from York into Scotland. It is sometimes contended that it was here, and not at the King's Head, Barnard Castle, that he met the original of John Browdie, who is said by the people of Bowes to have been one Thomas Todd, and certainly, in announcing the death of this worthy man, at the age of eighty-six, the *Teesdale Mercury* of 1 July, 1885, stated that he was believed to have that honour, and described him as a man of 'the highest integrity'. However that may be, somebody in either Bowes or Barnard Castle advised Dickens to visit William Shaw's Academy at the western extremity of Bowes, and there is no doubt whatever about this being the original of Dotheboys Hall. Much of it is still standing, though greatly altered. It is no longer the 'long, cold-looking house, one-storey high, with a few straggling outbuildings behind, and a barn and stable adjoining'. Long and cold-looking it is, and the stable and barn are there. The schoolroom has gone; but the dormitories, scenes of such brutality, remain, with the names of some of the boys burned by a candle in one of the beams. Most moving of all is the pump in the cobbled yard, where the boys were turned out to wash on even the most bitterly cold mornings, which reminds us of the morning immediately following the day of Nicholas's arrival in this bleak northern village. It was seven o'clock.

"Has morning come already?" asked Nicholas, sitting up in bed.

"Ah! that it has," replied Squeers, "and ready iced too. Now, Nickleby, come; tumble up, will you?" Nicholas needed no further admonition, but "tumbled up" at once, and proceeded to dress himself by the light of the taper which Mr. Squeers carried in his hand.

"Here's a pretty go," said that gentleman; "the pump's froze."

“Indeed!” said Nicholas, not much interested in the intelligence.

“Yes,” replied Squeers. “You can’t wash yourself this morning.”

“Not wash myself!” exclaimed Nicholas.

“No, not a bit of it,” rejoined Squeers tartly. “So you must be content with giving yourself a dry polish till we break the ice in the well, and can get a bucketful out for the boys. Don’t stand staring at me, but do look sharp, will you?”

In his private diary, now in the South Kensington Museum, Dickens says of Shaw, the prototype of Squeers: ‘Shaw, the schoolmaster we saw to-day, is the man in whose school several boys went blind some time since, from gross neglect. The case was tried and the verdict went against him. It must have been between 1823 and ’26. Look this out in the newspapers.’

The cause of this blindness was proved to be ophthalmia, from which at least twenty boys were suffering at one time. No proper treatment was given, and either from fear of infection or in order to keep their condition a secret, each boy, as soon as the symptoms appeared, was put with the others in a cold stone wash-house. Far from exaggerating in his account of what went on in these Yorkshire Schools, Dickens seems to have been at pains to tone down the effects. In a letter to a Mrs. S. C. Hall he says:

‘Depend upon it that the rascalities of those Yorkshire school-masters *cannot* easily be exaggerated, and that I have kept down the strong truth and thrown as much comicality over it as I could, rather than disgust and weary the reader with its fouler aspects. The identical scoundrel you speak of I saw—curiously enough. His name is Shaw; the action was tried (I believe) eight or ten years since, and if I am not much mistaken another action was brought against him by the parents of a miserable child, a cancer in whose head he opened with an inky penknife, and so caused his death. The country for miles round was covered, when I was there, with deep snow. There was an old church near

the school, and the first grave-stone I stumbled on that dreary winter afternoon was placed above the grave of a boy, eighteen years old, who had died—suddenly, the inscription said; I suppose his heart broke—the camel falls down “suddenly” when they heap the last load upon his back—died at that wretched place. I think his ghost put SMIKE into my head, upon the spot.’

The first case against Shaw was tried before a Court of Common Pleas on 30 October, 1823, when damages of £300 were awarded; the second was heard the following day, with identical results.

Shaw's Academy, along with most of the others in the North Riding, was ruined when *Nicholas Nickleby* was published. Shaw himself became senile and paralytic; his wife died prematurely, broken in health and spirit by the disgrace of such an exposure. As we should expect, the graves of both Shaw and his wife, as well as of ‘Fanny Squeers’ and ‘Wackford’, who died at the age of twenty-four, are to be seen in Bowes churchyard. What is, however, surprising, is that there is a stained-glass window to the memory of William Shaw in the church! It was unveiled at Whitsuntide 1896, forty-six years after the death of the man it commemorates, but it may be a relief to those who are sensitive about such things to know that it was not set up by public subscription. The sole donor was Shaw's granddaughter, a Miss Bousfield. Poor SMIKE, who is said to have been weak in the head, outlived his cruel master. He died in 1855, at what was then the ripe age of seventy-four.

Shaw's school is said to have been better than some in the neighbourhood. The most notorious of all was Simpson's at Wodencroft Lodge, Cotherstone, where the boys, who did all the work of a large farm, went about all the year round without shoes or stockings. But Simpson died ten years before Dickens visited Teesdale. Clarkson's Academy at Bowes Hall, one of the schools that had to close down as the result of the exposure in *Nicholas Nickleby*, was sometimes said to be the original of Dotheboy's Hall. Indeed, Clarkson actually threatened Dickens with a law suit, but

on taking advice thought better of it and moved into Yarm, where his life is said to have been shortened by intemperance.

One of these now notorious schools in Bowes was kept by a clergyman named Adamthwaite, who used to take services in the church, and no one, apparently, regarded him as a hypocrite for doing so. Indeed, at one time such schools were an important source of income for the people of Bowes. There would be as many as four hundred boys at a time in the village, which meant that four hundred times twenty guineas was available for circulation each year as a result of them, and money was not easily come by in Bowes at that time. When I visited the village myself in 1953, and discussed Dotheboys Hall with the people I met, I was assured that the account in *Nicholas Nickleby* 'laid it on too thick'. When I suggested that some of the hardships were inflicted unconsciously, pointing out that to bring neglected, unwanted boys from the milder South into this wind-swept Northern village, and turn them out to wash at an outdoor pump, would itself be cruel, and might even prove fatal to a delicate boy, I was interrupted with: 'Nowt o' t' soort. Fresh air kills nobody.' Quite obviously this tough, genial, and apparently kindly person would have done the same in 1953 without any compunction. I was also informed, and no doubt correctly, that the diet in these schools was no different from that in every cottage and farmhouse in the district. Oatmeal porridge was the staple. Milk was plentiful, and pigs and beasts, as cattle are called there, were killed and salted for the winter table.

It is often said that the publication of *Nicholas Nickleby* ruined the village as well as the schools. This, however, seems to be an exaggeration on the other side. It is true that the population of Bowes was about two thousand in 1830, and that within fifty years it had been reduced to about four hundred. The closing of the schools would remove four hundred or so; but cannot have been responsible for the rest of the reduction. The real cause of decay was the withdrawal of the stage coaches, an event for which Dickens could hardly be held responsible.

Today, Bowes is a clean and healthy village, with a strong appeal to those for whom the past is still present. Behind its church and castle ruins are the earthworks which mark the site of the Roman station of *Lavatracæ*, while for those with an eye for humbler relics there is a stone in the garden of one of its trim and well-kept cottages—and cleanliness is still next to godliness in the North—which is surely an old mark stone, and may be the base of a market cross. Tradition has it that in time of pestilence the farmers and their wives laid their produce on the stone, then retired to a distance while it was collected, returning to pick up the money paid, which had been placed in a bowl of vinegar.

Beyond the village the road sweeps up to the windy heights of Stainmore, where, set in imposing entrenchments, stands the Rey Roy, or Rere Cross, the stone which formerly marked the boundary between Yorkshire and Westmorland referred to by Sir Walter Scott, who sings:

*And the best of our nobles his bonnet shall vail,
Who at Rere Cross on Stanemoor meets Allan a Dale.*

According to tradition it was here that Malcolm Canmore and William the Conqueror met to decide by battle the boundary-line of their respective kingdoms, but settled their differences by parley instead, one of the articles in their agreement providing that 'in the midst of Stainmore there should be set up a cross with the king of England's image on one side and the king of Scotland's on the other'.

Happily, neither the nefarious practices in the Yorkshire schools, nor the bleakness of the weather on that first visit, lessened the attractions of the hardy North for Dickens. In *Two Idle Apprentices* he refers to the characteristic Lake District houses: 'black, coarse-stoned, rough-windowed houses, some with outer staircases, like Swiss houses', and to 'a sinuous and stony gutter winding up hill and round the corner by way of street', which must remind those of us who frequent this part of the country of their favourite haunts, while in *Household Words* there is an amusing description of Wigton market-place which again

shows the keenness of his observation and visual imagination. As for the more populous parts, Leeds, Lancaster, Carlisle, and most of the other great Northern towns and cities were visited in the course of his reading tours and impressions recorded, if only in letters home.

Scotland was no more Dickens's 'Land of Heart's Desire' than it was Dr. Johnson's; but he knew and admired Edinburgh from those early reporting days that produced so many brilliant sketches of town and country scenes. Consequently we have that fine description of Arthur's Seat in the forty-eighth chapter of *Pickwick*. There were at least four subsequent visits to Edinburgh, and we know that in 1861 he stayed at the Waterloo Hotel, in 1868 at Kennedy's.

In 1841, shortly before his visit to America, Dickens took his wife for a summer-holiday tour in what he called 'Rob Roy's Country'. Describing the Pass of Glencoe he wrote: 'The Pass is an awful place. It is shut in on each side by enormous rocks, from which great torrents come rushing down in all directions. In amongst these rocks on one side of the Pass . . . there are scores of glens high up, which form such haunts as you might imagine yourself wandering in in the very height and madness of a fever. They will live in my dreams for years. . . . They really are fearful in their grandeur and amazing solitude.' So great was the fascination of the Pass that he returned to it the following day. It had rained all night, and 'through the whole glen, which is ten miles long, torrents were boiling and foaming, and sending up in every direction spray like the smoke of great fires. They were rushing down every hill and mountain side, and tearing like devils across the path, and down into the depths of the rocks. . . . The sights and sounds were beyond description.'

There are fine descriptions in his letters to Forster of what he saw; but the letter to which I turn most often myself for his impressions of the North is one written to Professor Felton on 1 September, 1843, in which he says: 'Oh, heaven! such green woods as I was rambling among, down in Yorkshire . . . last July! For days and weeks we

never saw the sky but through green boughs; and all day long I cantered over such soft moss and turf, that the horse's feet scarcely made a sound upon it. We have some friends in that part of the country (close to Castle Howard, where Lord Morpeth's father dwells in state, *in* his park indeed), who are the jolliest of the jolly, keeping a big old country house, with an ale cellar something larger than a reasonable church, and everything like Goldsmith's bear dances, "in a concatenation accordingly". Just the place for you, Felton! We performed some madnesses there in the way of forfeits, picnics, rustic games, inspections of ancient monasteries at midnight, when the moon was shining, that would have gone to your heart, and, as Mr. Weller says, "come out on the other side" . . . That was the Yorkshire Dickens loved!

CHAPTER XII

WITH DICKENS IN THE SOUTH

THE South of England in Dickens is less clearly defined, and belongs to a mood rather than a region. As most of his principal characters in times of crisis find their way to London, the nerve centre of Dickens as well as of England, so in more carefree moods they are dispatched into the Southern counties.

This mood is best captured, perhaps, in Brighton, which Dickens discovered in 1837 when he resumed work on *Oliver Twist*. It was an auspicious year for England—the year of Queen Victoria's accession, as well as the year in which Dickens completed *Pickwick* and became possessed by *Oliver Twist*. And where better to greet the new era than Brighton? 'We have a beautiful bay-windowed sitting-room here, fronting the sea,' he wrote to Forster, 'but I have seen nothing of B's brother, who was to have shown me the lions, and my notions of the place are consequently somewhat confined: being limited to the pavilion, the chain-pier, and the sea. The last is quite enough for me, and, unless I am joined by some male companion (*do you think I shall be?*), is most probably all I shall make acquaintance with. . . . I have had great difficulty in keeping my hand off Fagin and the rest of them in the evenings; but as I came down for a rest, I have resisted the temptation, and steadily applied myself to the labour of being idle.' He was low in spirits at the time, suffering, no doubt, a reaction from the excessive stimulus of his early, astonishing success. In addition, the death of Mary Hogarth, his wife's youngest sister, had depressed him. It seems to have been a peculiarity of his home-life that he loved all three Hogarth girls indiscriminately, and perhaps even passionately. Anyhow, the death of Mary had a permanent affect on him, of which he

did something to purge himself in the death scene of Little Nell.

Visiting Brighton in such a mood, the gaiety of the parades and the flamboyance of the Pavilion would appeal to him at once. John Nash's Regency terraces were then the latest thing, not the charming period pieces they are to us. But best of all was the air, the one thing that remains as fresh as ever, although rather more people share it now.

It would not be too much to say that these days at Brighton, in the winter of 1837, were the turning point in his career as a novelist. *Pickwick* had been an immediate success, and shortly after his return to London there was the dinner in his honour, with Serjeant Talfourd, to whom he had dedicated the volume, in the chair. He was now an established writer.

On this first visit he stayed at the Old Ship Hotel in King's Road. Four years later, in February 1841, he again went down 'atop of the Brighton Era' to the Old Ship, and spent most of the time working on *Barnaby Rudge*. In fact he had gone down with the express purpose of working without interruption for a week, and the sea air seems to have done all that was asked of it. On 25 February he wrote: 'I have (it's four o'clock) done a fair morning's work, at which I have sat very close, and being blessed besides with a clear view of the end of the volume. As the contents of one number usually require a day's thought at the very least, and often more, this puts me in great spirits. 'Grip will be strong,' he confided, 'and I build greatly on the Varden household.' But when he returned home he found that the original Grip, the first of his pet ravens, had died during his absence. The bird had been ailing for some days, but appeared to be responding to veterinary treatment. One day he attracted attention by walking two or three times round the coach-house; after which, however, to the grief of the entire household, he stopped to bark and exclaim 'Halloa old girl'—his favourite expression—then staggered and died.

From 1837 until the beginning of the 1850s Brighton

remained Dickens's favourite among south-coast resorts. He found the air exhilarating, and to Dickens exhilaration meant a quickening of the pen as well as the pulse. In 1847 he spent the early summer months at 148 King's Road—next to the Norfolk Hotel—with his wife, Miss Hogarth, and his eldest son, working each morning on *Dombey and Son*, the novel most closely associated with the town. It had been started the previous summer at Lausanne, where Dickens rented a villa for several months, before moving to Paris with his family for the winter; but some of the best scenes in the story are set in Brighton, although whether the 'steep bye-street' in which the formidable Mrs. Pipchin lived can be identified with certainty is a matter of some dispute there.

Paul Dombey went from Mrs. Pipchin's to Dr. Blimber's select academy, or cramming-house, of which Dickens says: 'Dr. Blimber's establishment was a great hot-house, in which there was a forcing apparatus constantly at work. . . . Mental green peas were produced at Christmas, and intellectual asparagus all the year round. . . . The Doctor's was a mighty fine house fronting the sea.' This last mentioned circumstance has led to a good deal of discussion in identifying Dr. Blimber's. Brighton, of course, had several schools that might be described in such terms. But Dickens was probably doing what he had done so often, choosing his building to suit his purpose, and then installing in its rooms the most suitable school. If we accept this, we shall probably agree with those who tell us that the strongest case has been made out for Dr. Everard's school, which was known in Brighton as 'The Young House of Lords' because of the aristocratic connections of its pupils, and for Chichester House, which is the corner house at the western end of Chichester Terrace, near Sussex Square, an imposing building that did at one time serve as a school, as the building that housed it. In fact, Harrison Ainsworth, an intimate friend of Dickens at the time, said that Chichester House was the house intended.

'Dr. Blimber's house,' says Dickens, 'outside has as

scholastic and studious an air as ever. . . . The door is opened by the same weak-eyed young man, whose imbecility of grin at sight of Mr. Toots is feebleness of character personified. They are shown into the Doctor's study, where blind Homer and Minerva give them audience as of yore, to the sober ticking of the great clock in the hall; and where the globes stand still in their accustomed places, as if the world were stationary too, and nothing in it ever perished in obedience to the universal law that, while it keeps it on the roll, calls everything to earth. And here is Dr. Blimber, with his learned legs; and here is Mrs. Blimber, with her sky-blue cap; and here is Cornelia, with her sandy little row of curls, and her bright spectacles, still working like a sexton in the graves of language.'

Paul Dombey was modelled on Dickens's deformed nephew, Harry Burnett, the son of his favourite sister, Fanny, and the music teacher already referred to in connection with Manchester. Henry, the father, was a Brighton man, who had been discovered as a boy singer by the organist of the Chapel Royal. He and Fanny Dickens had met as students at the Royal Academy of Music. They were evidently personalities. In a forgotten book of *Memorials of the Past* by the Reverend James Griffin, a former demagogue of the Congregational Church, who drew enormous congregations during his various pastorates, particularly the one at Hastings, there is an entire chapter on Mr. and Mrs. Henry Burnett, whom Griffin had known at Rusholme Road Chapel, Manchester. Incidentally, Henry Burnett is said to be the original of Tom Pinch.

As Henry Burnett was a Brighton man it was natural that when the child was found to be delicate he should be sent there in search of health. He seems to have been one of those saintly youngsters who made such an appeal to the sentimental streak in Dickens. He was, says his uncle, 'meditative and quiet to a remarkable degree'. Besides providing a model for Paul Dombey he sat for the portrait of Tiny Tim, with his 'God bless us everyone'.

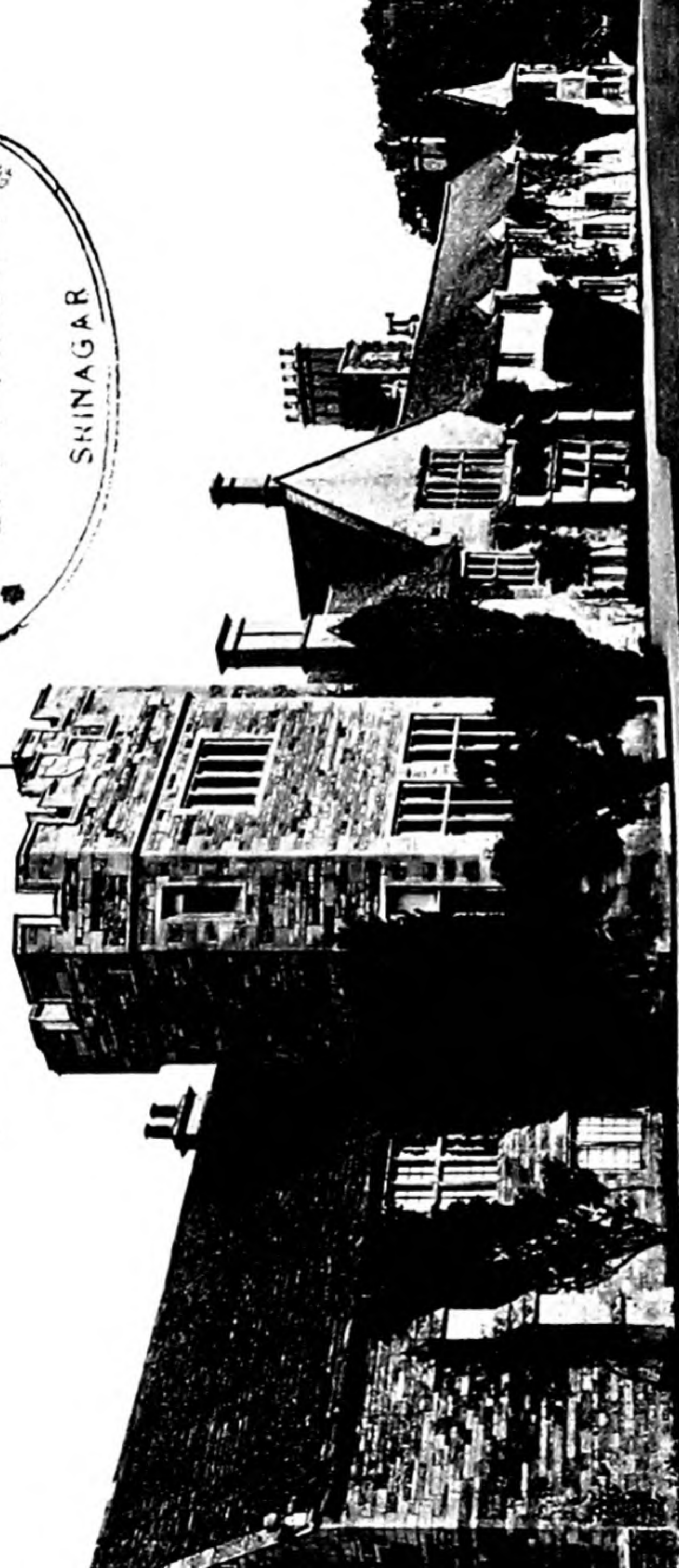
The other book with Brighton associations is the now



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ROCKINGHAM CASTLE, THE 'CHESNEY WOLD' OF BLEAK HOUSE

Photo by Valentine, Dundee

almost forgotten one, *The Haunted Man*, or *The Ghost's Bargain*, published in 1848, which was written at Brighton in a single month of feverish activity. On its completion the agreeably exhausted author wrote exultantly to Bradbury and Evans, his publishers: 'I finished last night; I've been crying my eyes out over it, not painfully but pleasantly, these last three days.'

In March 1848 Dickens and his wife spent three weeks at the Junction House, where they were 'very comfortably (not to say gorgeously) accommodated'. By this time he was a well-to-do man and could afford the Bedford, where Mr. Dombey stayed when he visited his children at Brighton, and where Major Bagstock was privileged to dine with the purse-proud city merchant. There are letters addressed from the Bedford from this time onward to the reading tours of his last years, when he invariably stayed there. But even as early as 1848 some of the gilt was wearing off Brighton. The railway reached the town in 1841, and although the novelist and the resort prospered together it was not always to their mutual satisfaction. Fame has its price for places as well as people, and in November 1848 Dickens wrote from the Bedford to his artist friend, George Stone: 'The Duke of Cambridge is staying at this house, and they are driving me mad by having Life Guards bands under our windows playing *our* overtures. . . .¹ I don't in the abstract approve of Brighton . . . but it is a gay place for a week or so; and when one laughs or cries, and suffers the agitation that some men experience over their books, it's a bright change.'

In the following February he was there again, and this time he did not find the visit either soothing or refreshing. Soon after he and his wife had been joined by Leech and his wife in rooms they had taken for the holiday, the landlord and his daughter suddenly went raving mad. 'If you could have heard the cursing and crying of the two,' wrote Dickens, 'could have seen the physician and nurse quotted

¹ The overtures Dickens and his friends used in their amateur theatricals.

out into the passage by the madman at the hazard of their lives; could have seen Leech and me flying to the doctor's rescue; could have seen our wives pulling us back; could have seen the M.D. faint with fear; could have seen three other M.D.s come to his aid; with an atmosphere of Mrs. Gamps, strait-waistcoats, struggling friends and servants, surrounding the whole; you would have said it was quite worthy of me, and quite in keeping with my usual proceedings.' But chaotic as the environment was, it was here that he thought of the title for his next book. 'A sea-fog to-day,' he wrote, 'but yesterday inexpressibly delicious. My mind running, like a high sea, on names—not satisfied yet, though.' In the next letter he had it. The book was already started, and its title was to be *David Copperfield*.

There are many such sidelights on Dickens's mental processes to be discovered in his letters. In 1850, for example, he disclosed that he found railway travel conducive to inspiration. 'Coming down in the rail-road the other night (always a wonderfully suggestive place to me when I am alone),' he confided in parentheses.

In 1849 he decided to try the Isle of Wight for a change, and rented the attractive villa, Winterbourne, at Bonchurch for six months. It was a productive holiday. He worked well on *David Copperfield* and wrote to his friends in rapturous terms about the scenery, until both he and his children began to realize that the air did not suit them in the high summer. Forster says 'he began with an excess of liking,' which did not last. But it was the climate he didn't like. That was all. The air was not sufficiently bracing for his children, who were always at their best in cold and breezy places, such as Broadstairs. He himself missed the downs behind Brighton, on which he would walk for hours at a stretch—as many as six one day—without once stopping to rest.

The other southern counties of England are not prominent in Dickens. He knew little of Surrey, which, after all, was his sort of county—picturesque, and with breezy heaths. Mrs. Weller's inn, the Marquis of Granby, was at Dorking,

and 'quite a model of a road-side public-house of the better class—just large enough to be convenient, and small enough to be snug'. But although claims have been put forward for both the King's Arms and the White Horse, neither has been established, although the balance of probabilities is in favour of the King's Arms.

Several of Dickens's characters pass through Guildford; but if he knew the town himself it is remarkable that he made no attempt to describe the cobbled high street with its fine old clock. It is the kind of street that usually raised him to the highest pitch of excitement. Mr. Crummles and his company, we may remember, passed through Guildford on their way to Portsmouth, and David Copperfield and Dora had that heavenly day somewhere near; but they, of course, were so interested in each other that they hardly knew where they were, except that 'it was a green spot on a hill, carpeted with soft turf. There were shady trees, and heather, and, as far as the eye could see, a rich landscape.'

Nicholas and Smike passed through Godalming and Hindhead, and here we are on safer ground because we have descriptions that show conclusively that Dickens did know the country. It was the tract that runs from Hindhead over Butser Hill and across Oxenbourne Downs to Petersfield:

'Onward they kept, with steady purpose, and entered at length upon a wide and spacious tract of downs, with every variety of little hill and plain to change their verdant surface. Here, there shot up, almost perpendicularly, into the sky, a height so steep, as to be hardly accessible to any but the sheep and goats that fed upon its sides, and there stood a mound of green, sloping and tapering off so delicately, and merging so gently into the level ground, that you could scarce define its limits. Hills swelling above each other; and undulations, shapely and uncouth, smooth and rugged, graceful and grotesque, thrown negligently side by side, bounded the view in each direction; while frequently, with unexpected noise, there uprose from the ground, a flight of crows, who, cawing and wheeling round the nearest hills, as if uncertain of their course, suddenly poised themselves

upon the wing and skimmed down the long vista of some opening valley, with the speed of light itself.

'By degrees, the prospect receded more and more on either hand, as they had been shut out from rich and extensive scenery, so they emerged once again upon the open country.'

But while the southern counties are thin in comparison with others in Dickensian lore, if we take the Thames above London as the northern boundary we strike another rich seam, and one in keeping with the general theme, because this is the part of the river we associate with pleasure rather than business, although now, of course, the dividing line is higher than it was a hundred years ago, when the Red House at Battersea, for example, nearly opposite Chelsea Hospital, had a favourite tea-garden, and was renowned for its shooting contests. Several of Dickens's characters lived at Chelsea. Vincent Crummles was born there; Sophia Wack kept 'a very small day-school for young ladies of proportionate dimensions' at Chelsea, and Mr. Bayham Badger in *Bleak House* had a good practice there. In *Pickwick* we have Sam Weller likening Job Trotter to Chelsea Water Works, and it was the thought of Chelsea that caused Silas Wegg to break into verse:

*'Then farewell, my trim-built wherry.
Oars and coat and badge farewell!
Nevertheless at Chelsea Ferry
Shall your Thomas take a spell.'*

There is a cluster of such associations as far as Twickenham, renowned for its Eel-pie Island opposite the parish church, of which we read in *Nicholas Nickleby*: 'It had come to pass, that afternoon, that Miss Morleena Kenwigs had received an invitation to repair next day, per steamer from Westminster Bridge, unto the Eel-pie Island at Twickenham: there to make merry upon a cold collation, bottled-beer, shrub and shrimps, and to dance in the open air to the music of a locomotive band.' Dickens knew the place well. On one occasion he wrote to Forster that 'he was to

be heard of at the Eel-pie House at Twickenham'. In the summer of 1838 he spent a few weeks at 4 Ailsa Park Villas, where he wrote part of *Oliver Twist* and was visited by Thackeray, Forster, Douglas Jerrold, Maclise, and Landseer.

'We had many friendly days,' writes Forster of this summer at Twickenham, relating how the Dickens children formed a balloon club, of which he was elected president on condition he supplied all the balloons. He appears to have failed in this duty, however, because one morning he found on his desk a letter from the secretary, which ran:

Gammon Lodge

Sir—I am requested to inform you that at a numerous meeting of the Gammon Aeronautical Society, for encouragement of Science and the consumption of spirits (of wine), Thomas Beard, Esq., Charles Dickens, Snodgering Bee, Popham Gee, and other distinguished characters being present, and assenting, a vote of censure, of which I enclose a copy, was unanimously passed upon you for gross negligence of your duty to the most unjustifiable discredit of the best interest of the society.

I am, sir, your most obedient servant,

CHARLES DICKENS, *Hon. Secretary.*

J. Forster, Esq.

Romantic riverside scenery always appealed to Dickens, and he sought out several charming cottages and villas along the Thames for the occupation of his more favoured characters. Mr. Meagels in *Little Dorrit* had a cottage at Twickenham, embowered by 'handsome trees and spreading evergreens', within view of the river and the ferry boat, where he was visited by Arthur Clennam, who had come by water. Mr. Tupman of *Pickwick Papers* found a pleasant retreat for himself at Richmond, where he formed the habit of walking regularly on the Terrace during the summer months, 'with a youthful and jaunty air, which has rendered him the admiration of the numerous elderly ladies of single condition who reside in the vicinity'. Dickens entertained a

party at Richmond, with Thackeray and Tennyson among the guests, to celebrate the completion of *David Copperfield*, and for twenty years kept up his wedding anniversary there, reserving a table at the Star and Garter, which commanded a view of the river from the crest of Richmond Hill.

His other Thames-valley resort was Chertsey. Here he spent several summers at Elm Cottage, later called Elm Lodge, where, says Forster, 'The extensive garden admitted of much athletic competition. Here bar-leaping, bowling, and quoits were carried on with the greatest ardour, and in sustained energy, in what is called keeping it up, Dickens certainly outdistanced every competitor.' Pyrcroft House, which is in the street of that name reached from Guildford Street, is often said to be the home of the Maylies, whose house was burgled on a certain memorable night by Bill Sikes and Oliver Twist. All we can say of it is that it fits the story and to that extent the claim is good. Pyrcroft House is now used for the junior department of the Sir William Perkins School, the Girls' Grammar School of the area.

On the night in question Bill Sikes and his unwary confederate, Oliver, journeyed to Chertsey by way of Isleworth, Hampton, and Shepperton, stopping at Hampton to refresh themselves. They had been given a lift in a cart going to Hounslow as far as the Coach and Horses at Isleworth, and from here, we are told, 'They turned round to the left, a short way past the public-house; and then, taking a right-hand road, walked on for a long time; passing many large gardens and gentlemen's houses on both sides of the way; and stopping for nothing but a little beer, until they reached a town. Here, against the wall of a house, Oliver saw written up in pretty large letters HAMPTON. They lingered about in the fields for some hours. At length they came back into the town; and, turning into an old public-house, with a defaced sign-board, ordered some dinner by the kitchen fire. The kitchen was an old low-roofed room, with a great beam across the middle of the ceiling, and benches, with high backs to them, by the fire, on which were seated several rough men in smock-frocks drinking and

smoking.' Whether this was the old Red Lion, afterwards rebuilt, or the White Hart, Dickensians have never decided, although, no doubt, the landlords concerned have been ready enough to advance the claims of their respective houses!

Sunbury is mentioned in the course of the narrative. After passing it the road was too dark for Oliver to see much until they reached Chertsey and Toby Crackit.

There is a fine description of Hampton Races in *Nicholas Nickleby*, showing us what it was 'in the full tide and height of its gaiety' in the stylish 'thirties. But *Our Mutual Friend* is the book we think of most often for the upper as well as the lower reaches of the river. Here we have those 'pleasant towns of Chertsey, Walton, Kingston, and Staines', through which Betty Higden, whose sole aim in life was to maintain her independence and keep out of the workhouse, trudged to her last resting-place. It was characteristic of Dickens to want to bring such people out to places where, as he says, 'you may hear the fall of the water over the weirs, or even, in still weather, the rustle of the rushes; and from the bridge you may see the young river, dimpled like a young child, playfully gliding away among the trees, unpolluted by the defilements that lie in wait for it on its course, and as yet out of hearing of the deep summons of the sea?'

That fine girl, Lizzie Hexam, came out to this same district to get away from Eugene Wrayburn, the cocksure, insolent young barrister whose attentions at this point in the story were so unwelcome to her. She found work at Marsh Mill, which is still standing, half a mile out of Henley, and the most dramatic parts of the novel have Plashwater Weir and the towpath for their setting. Plashwater Weir Lock is in fact Hurley Lock, which is about thirty-two miles above London and situated at the point between Hurley and Henley where the river indulges in one of its serpentine bends, and thus makes the distance between the two places more than twice as far by water as it is by road, a circumstance Dickens was able to turn to good account in planning the different ways to be taken by Eugene Wray-

burn and his rival Bradley Headstone. Eugene, it will be recalled, went by boat, Bradley by road.

In Chapter I of Book IV we are introduced to Plash-water Weir-Mill Lock on a tranquil summer evening, with Rogue Riderhood sitting dozing on one of the blunt wooden levers of the lock gates, ready to be roused by Eugene Wrayburn. Lizzie agrees to meet Eugene on the towpath; but still rejects him. 'Mr. Wrayburn,' she says, 'I implore you to go away from this neighbourhood tomorrow morning.' When they part, Eugene ran into a man he did not recognize, but who was, in fact, the jealous Bradley Headstone disguised as a bargeman. There was no fight at that point. The two men proceeded in opposite directions, and Dickens is most detailed in his account of their movements. Eugene 'passed the sheep, and passed the gate, and came within hearing of the village sounds, and came to the bridge. The inn where he stayed, like the village and the mill, was not across the river, but on that side of the stream on which he walked. However, knowing the rushy bank and the backwater on the other side to be a retired place, and feeling out of humour for noise or company, he crossed the bridge, and sauntered on: looking up at the stars as they seemed one by one to be kindled in the sky, and looking down at the river as the same stars seemed to be kindled deep in the water.' There he was set upon and all but murdered. Meanwhile, Lizzie also had succumbed to the serenity of the hour and the composure of the scene until, as she turned towards home, she heard the sound of blows, followed by a faint groan and the splash of something heavy falling into the river.

Lizzie Hexam was bred on the river. The old sinister ways of life she had known with her father returned to her mind, and in a few seconds she was racing along the bank towards the place from which the sounds had come. 'At length, she reached a part of the green bank, much and newly trodden, where there lay some broken splintered pieces of wood and some torn fragments of clothes. Stooping, she saw that the grass was bloody. Following the drops and

smears, she saw that the watery margin of the bank was bloody. Following the current with her eyes, she saw a bloody face turned up towards the moon, and drifting away.' All her old skill returned to her as she found a boat and rowed downstream, passing on her right the end of the steep village street that almost dipped into the stream. When, at last, she reached the floating body, she leaned over as she had so often seen her father do in the bad old days, when she had always shuddered at the sight, and without a moment's hesitation dragged the sodden mass into the boat. It was only then that she discovered that the body she had taken from the river was her lover's.

It is clear that Lizzie must have crossed the river by Marsh Lock gates, and then have proceeded along the main road to Henley, passing the paper mill where she worked, and near which Betty Higden died. After the rescue she rowed to the inn, with its lawn sloping down to the river and private landing-stange, which we may assume was the Red Lion, and where, some time later, in 'a darkened and hushed room', she and Eugene were married.

CHAPTER XIII

GAD'S HILL AND THE ROCHESTER OF *EDWIN DROOD*

WITH the novelist's instinct for form and fitting climax, Dickens tried to round off his life by buying Gad's Hill Place and settling there. At first everything went according to plan except the settling. It was not in his nature to achieve that. On 17 January, 1857, he wrote to his friend, Monsieur de Cerjat:

'Down at Gad's Hill, near Rochester, in Kent—Shakespeare's Gad's Hill, where Falstaff engaged in the robbery—is a quaint little country house of Queen Anne's time. I happened to be walking past, a year and a half or so ago, with my sub-editor of *Household Words*, when I said to him: "You see that house? It has always had a curious interest for me, because when I was a small boy down in these parts I thought it the most beautiful house (I suppose because of its famous old cedar-trees) ever seen. And my poor father used to bring me to look at it, and used to say that if ever I grew up to be a clever man perhaps I might own that house, or such another house. In remembrance of which, I have always in passing looked to see if it was to be sold or let, and it has never been to me like any other house, and it has never changed at all." We came back to town, and my friend went out to dinner. Next morning he came to me in great excitement, and said: "It is written that you were to have that house at Gad's Hill. The lady I had allotted to me to take down to dinner yesterday began to speak of that neighbourhood. 'You know it,' I said; 'I have been there to-day.' 'O yes,' said she, 'I know it very well. I was a child there, in the house they call Gad's Hill Place. My father was the rector, and lived there many years. He has just died, has left it to me, and I want to sell it.' So," says

the sub-editor, "You must buy it. Now or never." I did, and hope to pass next summer there, though I may, perhaps, let it afterwards, furnished, from time to time.'

The house was not as old as Dickens suggested. It was built in 1780 by a former mayor of Rochester who had begun his working life as an ostler at an inn, rising to affluence by the time-honoured method of marrying the landlord's widow. Dickens bought it in February, and in April went down with his wife and sister-in-law to stay at Waite's Hotel, Gravesend, in order to superintend alterations. A few weeks later he moved in and in July of the following year again wrote to Cerjat. 'At this present moment,' he said, 'I am on my little Kentish freehold (not in top-boots and not particularly prejudiced that I know of), looking on as pretty a view out of my study window as you will find in a long day's English ride. My little place is a grave red-brick house, which I have added to and stuck bits upon in all manner of ways, so that it is as pleasantly irregular, and as violently opposed to all architectural ideas, as the most hopeful man could possibly desire. The robbery was committed before the door, on the man with the treasure, and Falstaff ran away from the identical spot of ground now covered by the room in which I write. A little rustic alehouse, called The Sir John Falstaff, is over the way—has been over the way, ever since, in honour of the event. Cobham Woods and Park are behind the house; the distant Thames in front; the Medway, with Rochester, and its old castle and cathedral, on one side. The whole stupendous property is on the old Dover Road. The blessed woods and fields have done me a world of good, and I am quite myself again.'

He was forty-five when he became the owner of Gad's Hill—a good age, normally, for a writer to spread his wings for his most ambitious flight. Financially, he could afford it; but his domestic exchequer, if the term may be allowed, was already depleted. He was not to know, however, how dangerously low his reserves in everything except money would soon become. Meanwhile the new house was tremendous fun. There were snags, of course, as there usually

are with a house that has been in a single ownership so long. The old rector had lived there more than forty years, and had spent little on maintenance. There was nothing in the way of amenities, not even water. But Dickens liked giving orders, and there were workmen everywhere for months at a time. When the structure was more or less to his liking he indulged his romanticism on the trimmings. The flower-beds were filled with hundreds of scarlet geraniums, his favourite flowers, and everything else was done in the same extravagant style. It is not surprising that his quieter neighbours should have raised their eyebrows at the lavish way he did things, and have been a trifle suspicious when he began to storm their social citadel. But they found him genial and friendly. He was not in the least bombastic, in spite of his love of show, and before long he was universally respected.

As Dickens has recently become an Aunt Sally for highbrows it is just as well that we should be reminded of the friendly, likeable man his neighbours at Gad's Hill saw in him. W. R. Hughes, who wrote a book entitled *A Week's Tramp in Dickensland*, is our best authority here. He took the trouble to enquire about Dickens from people who had known him personally. There was Mrs. Masters, for example, who kept *The Crispin and Crispianus* at Strood for more than thirty years. She remembered Dickens well. He was in the habit, she said, of calling for a mug of ale or a brandy on his way home from Rochester, or from a tramp on the marshes. He would come striding up the hill, usually in the middle of the road, dressed in loose-fitting clothes, 'low shoes not over-well mended, loose large check-patterned trousers that sometimes got entangled in the shoes when walking, a brown coat thrown open, sometimes without waistcoat, a belt instead of braces, a necktie which now and then got round towards his ear, and a large-brimmed felt hat, similar to an American's, set well at the back of his head.' He would swing an umbrella, gripped in the middle, as he walked, and if his dogs were with him a whip as well. His step was rapid, his figure erect except for the head, which was so poised that his gaze was usually fixed on the ground a few paces ahead.

On entering The Crispin he would walk straight over to a settle, speaking to no one, but taking in the room with a sweeping glance that missed nothing. This was particularly characteristic of him. 'I looked at nothing,' David Copperfield says, 'but I saw everything.' That was Dickens describing himself. On one occasion, Mrs. Masters recalled, it was raining heavily, and Dickens stood at the window watching the passers-by, when he noticed a poor woman, wet and travel-stained, sheltering on the opposite side of the road with a baby clutched to her breast. Dickens had the woman called in, and told Mrs. Masters to draw her some brandy, at the same time slipping a shilling into her hand himself. It may seem a trifling incident, but it is the kind of thing his neighbours remembered about Dickens.

Mr. J. Couchman, the Strood builder who did all the alterations at Gad's Hill, testified that 'Mr. Dickens was always very straightforward, honourable, and kind, and paid his bills most regularly', which is a particularly interesting tribute in view of the slipshod ways of his father, his brother, and later his own sons. He was a stickler for work being done to specifications and completed on time. If the conditions were fulfilled he paid on the nail.

This was the kind of reputation enjoyed universally in the Gad's Hill and Rochester neighbourhood by Dickens. Everyone had a good word for him, almost invariably commenting on his liberality and pleasant manner of address. His servants worshipped him. An old lady who had been parlourmaid at Gad's Hill at the time of his death referred to him as 'the dearest and best gentleman that ever lived, and the kindest of masters', while a neighbour in a higher walk of life, a land-agent and county councillor named Cobb, said, 'Mr. Dickens was a very pleasant neighbour, and had always got something nice to say. He was a dreadful man to walk—very few could keep up with him.' This particular gentleman had a son who played with the Dickens boys, and the fathers would compare progress reports:

'What are you going to bring your boy up to?' asked Dickens one day.

'A land agent,' replied Mr. Cobb.

'Ah,' said Dickens, 'whatever you do, make him self-reliant.'

As it turned out, this would have been a bitter saying if he could then have known that his own boys would be anything but that. Only his sixth son and eighth child, Henry Fielding, was to live up to expectations, and at one stage Dickens thought that even Henry would have to be written off as a loss. Charles, the eldest, and Edward, the youngest, affectionately known as 'Plorn', and long the favourite, inherited their mother's lassitude. Miss Coutts, who was Dickens's partner in so many of his social enterprises for improving the lot of the poor, tried to solve the problem of Charles's career by putting up the money to buy him a partnership in a paper mill, but he mismanaged it so badly that the firm had to go into liquidation. Later he pulled himself together and helped his father with *Household Words*.

Sydney, the sailor son, was a waster, and after filling his father's heart with pride when he first put on his uniform—his 'little Admiral', Dickens called him—squandered both money and opportunities so recklessly that he was forbidden to show himself at Gad's Hill. Walter, the fourth of Dickens's ten children, proved equally disappointing right through to his death in India in 1863 at the age of twenty-two. But the greatest disappointment was the very likeable 'Plorn', who was packed off to Australia. 'He has always been the most difficult of the boys to deal with, away from home,' wrote his sorely tried father. 'There is not the least harm in him, and he is far more reflecting and more alive *au fond* than any of his brothers. But he seems to have been born without a groove. It cannot be helped. If he cannot, or will not find one, I must try again, and die trying.' When Plorn was sent out to his brother in Australia, Dickens put two hundred pounds into his hands and a letter in which he said: 'Never take a mean advantage of anyone in any transaction, and never be hard upon people who are in your power. . . . I put a New Testament among your books, for the very same

reasons, and with the very same hopes that made me write an easy account of it for you, when you were a little child. As your brothers have gone away, one by one, I have written to each such words as I am now writing to you.' As the boat sailed away, the father confessed, 'He [Plorn] seemed to me to become once more my youngest and favourite child . . . and I did not think I could have been so shaken.'

After so many disappointments it was hardly surprising that Dickens should have wanted to be sure about Henry, who was a quiet, hard-working boy, and unlike the others. Hard things have been said about his letter to the head of the school Henry attended, asking if he really was 'worth sending to Cambridge', and whether he did possess 'the qualities and habits essential to marked success there'. But surely this was only the common prudence one would expect in a self-made man who had been forced to recognize that his own remarkable gifts had not been passed on to his children. We can assess the measure of his disappointment by noting the grand names he had given his sons—Charles Culliford Boz, Walter Landor, Francis Jeffrey, Alfred Tennyson, Sydney Smith, Henry Fielding, and Edward Bulwer Lytton. Only Harry was worthy. When he won the best mathematical scholarship at Trinity the news left even Dickens speechless for a time. After the disappointments he had suffered with the others this was too much for him. There was an awkward silence between father and son for some minutes, then Dickens turned to Harry with tears in his eyes. 'God bless you, my boy,' he choked, 'God bless you.'

The daughters were not much brighter. He would dearly have liked to see Mary married to his disciple, Percy Fitzgerald. 'I am grievously disappointed,' he wrote, 'that Mary can by no means be induced to think as highly of him as I do.' No doubt she was a comfort to him in other ways. She always had affectionate memories of her father, and wrote most charmingly about him; but she disappointed him by failing to win a husband. How much she understood of her father's genius we do not know—probably nothing.

To Mamie he was before everything else a home-loving man. 'When he became celebrated at a very early age,' she says, 'all his joys and sorrows were taken home. . . . He was full of the kind of interest in the house which is commonly confined to women, and his care of and for us as wee children did certainly "pass the love of women". His was a tender and most affectionate nature.' Much of the care that normally falls to the mother did, in fact, devolve upon him.

Sir Henry Fielding Dickens's portrait of his father is very similar to his sister's. He also stressed the insistence on punctuality, the regularity of the morning's work in the chalet, and the abstemiousness. Regarding this Sir Henry says: 'At luncheon time he would occasionally stroll into the dining-room to take a biscuit and a glass of sherry. But at such times his mind was far away.' It was different, however, at dinner, 'when he threw aside work for the day and was his own bright, irresistible, interesting, radiant self, full of life, with wonderful animal spirits, and bubbling over with humour'. It is true that Sir Henry may be under suspicion of withholding one or two vital facts about his father. His reminiscences were provoked—and we should be grateful for it—by Ralph Strauss's biography, of which he says: 'I am quite unable to accept his description of my father's general character and disposition, which he presents in far too exaggerated and gloomy a light. No doubt, at certain periods of his life my father was intensely depressed and most unhappy. But these phases were intermittent and you have only to read the three volumes of his published letters to see that on the whole he got a keen enjoyment out of life.' With the offending biography in mind, it was only to be expected that he would attempt to restore the balance; but his known character and status must remove any suspicion of his wilfully trying to mislead his readers on so important a matter. He is in fact at pains to admit the darker moods, which afflict all highly-strung, emotional people; but the general effect of his witness is cheerful, and to my mind the published letters to which he refers confirm his evidence. There, as nowhere else, the lights can be

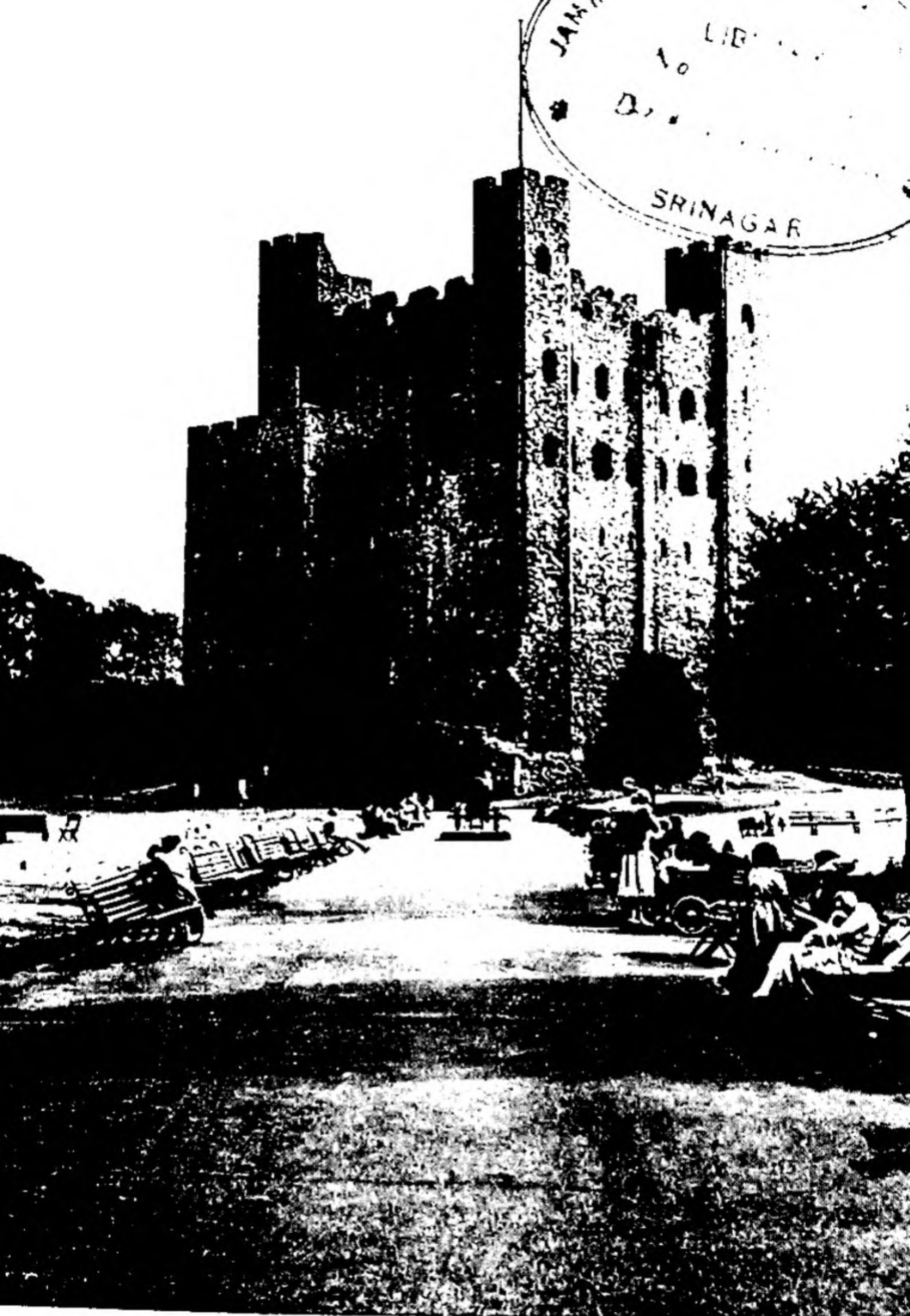


Photo by Valentine, c

ROCHESTER CASTLE



J. Chettleburgh

GAD'S HILL PLACE

balanced against the shadows, and the relative value of each assessed.

For what Sir Henry says about his father's thoroughness and concern for the poor and struggling there is abundant confirmation, as there is for his statement that Dickens was at his best when the house was full of guests. He loved company, and undoubtedly his friends as well as his family would agree with Sir Henry's summing-up. 'If I were asked,' he says, 'when all is said and done, what is my most abiding memory of him, I should say, beyond all question, it was of his lovable and great-hearted nature—a nature which not only appealed strongly to those who were dear to him, but which also won for him the affection and admiration of all those who were brought in direct association with him.'

I have no intention at this point of enquiring into Dickens's private affairs except in so far as they affected his work; but it may be observed in passing that we have ample proof that his weak, ineffectual wife, worn out, perhaps, by excessive child-bearing—although the majority of Victorian women stood up to it well enough in those days of abundant domestic help—was incapable of running the home, which meant that the children had to be reared by their father and their Aunt Georgina. There is nothing to be gained by trying to apportion blame for the failure of the Dickens marriage—if indeed there was any blame beyond what might justly be attributed to the make-up of the couple. Genius is largely an affair of energy, and Mrs. Dickens would have been a very remarkable woman indeed if she could have kept up with her husband. She would have had to be, as Hesketh Pearson puts it, 'a forty-wife-power partner'. As a rule, the apparently successful marriages with genius are simply those in which the disparity is either most artfully or most charitably concealed, and with the Dickenses both art and charity were exhausted before the end. Whatever the rights or wrongs may have been, however, it is reasonable to remember that notwithstanding what others have said against Dickens, his own children left portraits that are affectionate as well as loyal.

No one would deny that there was a hard and sinister side to the character of Dickens, or that the last four years of his life brought misery to himself and his entire family. But some of those who have written about the ageing Dickens remind me of Sam Weller's comment on the touts for licences at Doctors' Commons: 'They put things into old gen'lm'n's heads as they never dreamed of.' There was never any secret about the utter despair and misery of those last years, although it was, perhaps, a pity that the misguided loyalty of Sir Henry Dickens should have kept back the truth about the Ellen Ternan affair until those who could have assessed it at its true value were dead. In the face of all that is known about the Dickenses it is astonishing to me that what was so obviously effect should be regarded as cause. Dickens was already worn and sick in body and soul when he took the house at Peckham for Ellen Ternan. He had staked all at life's gambling-table, and had lost what he prized most, his hopes for his family. There is not a shred of evidence to show that he was a self-indulgent man, or a man spoiled by success. There is plenty to show that he lived for his work, his family and his public, and that when his family failed him he worked himself to death. There is nothing unusual, and certainly nothing criminal, in using work as a safety valve for domestic misery, and despite what Victorians said to the contrary, excessive work does kill. Nor is there anything surprising about an Ellen Ternan intervening. Those who see a good deal of this side of life might even say that, given a man as emotional and passionate as Dickens, it was inevitable. What all must deplore is the difference in their ages. When they first met in 1858 she was nineteen, he forty-seven.

But although we may explain, and in a manner excuse, the affair, there is no denying that its consequences were tragic for everyone concerned. The suffering of the Gad's Hill household, which had always revolved round the father, was extreme. Miss Storey quotes Kate Dickens (Mrs. Perugini) as saying: 'My father was like a madman when my mother left home; this affair brought out all that was

worst—all that was weakest—in him. He did not care a damn what happened to any of us. Nothing could surpass the misery and unhappiness of our home.' Yet Sir Sydney Cockerell, writing in the *Sunday Times* of 22 March, 1953, following up Earl Jowitt's masterly analysis of the Ellen Ternan affair, says that when he was a boy his mother and Mrs. Wharton Robinson, as Miss Ternan became, were close friends, and he remembered meeting both Mamie Dickens and Georgina Hogarth at her house in or about 1880, which shows, he adds, 'that, whatever may have been the relationship between Dickens and Miss Ternan, it caused no breach between her and Dickens's much loved and much respected sister-in-law. Assuming an intrigue to have occurred, surely so frequent a situation is being unduly magnified. The degree of intimacy to which their mutual admiration led them was their own affair. Our homage to Dickens as the creator of immortal characters, whom innumerable devotees besides Tolstoy have regarded as their personal friends, is undiminished.' That, we may hope, will be the view of most sensible people when the prurient have found another object for their morbid attention.

But before we watch the storm clouds lour, and the sun of his genius go down in sullen gloom, let us try to get a clear view of that glorious late afternoon, as it were, at Gad's Hill, with Dickens in the fullness of his pride as writer and public figure. And there was a brief period in which it was physical as well as mental pride. As a boy he had been delicate and unable to play boisterous games. With manhood had come strength and opportunities for cultivating the outdoor sports and exercises that gave him such pleasure. Riding, walking, bathing, and pitting his strength against that of his children in games on the lawn were his favourite pastimes in the first years at Gad's Hill. Dickens was a great believer in the benefits to be derived from country air and strenuous exercise, and, characteristically, he carried his enthusiasm to excess. The Kentish air was like wine to him. He was sure he could never have too much of it. And there was a reflective as well as a strenuous side to life at

Gad's Hill. Dickens had a particular weakness for the tramps and gipsies who were never far to seek on the Dover Road, because Kent, as he would often remind his friends, is gipsy-land as well as pilgrim-land. He would watch their caravans pass by his gate and drive on to the heath, while across the way was the Falstaff Inn, where he could see the country folk collect on warm June evenings, and sit on benches set out by the roadside to drink their pints of ale. The Falstaff, he says, was 'a house of great resort for hay-making tramps and harvest tramps, inasmuch as they sit within drinking their mugs of beer, their relinquished scythes and reaping-hooks glaring out of the open windows, as if the whole establishment were a family war-coach of the Ancient Britons'.

'I have my eye,' he wrote, 'upon a piece of Kentish ground, bordered on either side by a wood, and having on one hand, between the road-dust and the trees, a skirting patch of grass. Wild-flowers grow in abundance on this spot, and it lies high and airy, with the distant river stealing steadily away to the ocean, like a man's life. To gain the milestone here—which the moss, primroses, violets, blue-bells, and wild-roses would soon render illegible but for the peering travellers pushing them aside with their sticks—you must come up a steep hill, come which way you may. So all the tramps with carts or caravans—the gipsy tramp, the show tramp. The "Cheap Jack"—find it impossible to resist the temptations of the place, and all turn the horse loose when they come to it, and boil the pot. Bless the place, I love the ashes of the vagabond fires that have scorched the grass! What tramp children do I see here, attired in a handful of rags . . . making a toy of the hobbled old horse who is not more like a horse than any cheap toy would be.'

Inland from Gad's Hill the way led along a country lane to Cobham. Pictures of the scene recur throughout his books because it was a region he had known intimately practically all his life. Sometimes he would take his guests for a stroll in Cobham Park: 'A delightful walk it was,' he says in one place, 'for it was a pleasant afternoon in June, and their

way lay through a deep and shady wood, cooled by the light wind which gently rustled the thick foliage. . . . They emerged upon an open park, with an ancient hall displaying the quaint and picturesque architecture of Elizabeth's time. Long vistas of stately oaks and elm-trees appeared on every side; large herds of deer were cropping the fresh grass; and occasionally a startled hare scoured along the ground with the speed of the shadows thrown by the light clouds which swept across a sunny landscape like a passing breath of summer.'

Every summer Gad's Hill Place was filled with guests, each bedroom lavishly furnished for their comfort, because although Dickens himself was abstemious, nothing was lacking that might gratify others. In the mornings he worked as usual; in the afternoons he drove his friends through the narrow Kentish lanes in the wicker pony-chaise, with the dogs running alongside, or set out for a long tramp across the marshes, maintaining a steady four miles an hour for three hours at a stretch. Such walks seldom exhausted him before his last illness. On returning he would collect his party for such strenuous games as rounders, battledore and shuttlecock, bowls, or quoits, and when five o'clock tea was announced he invariably protested, and always, says J. T. Fields, 'played longer and harder than any of the company, scorning the idea of going in to tea at that hour, and beating his ball instead, quite the youngest of the company up to the last moment'.

Such high spirits were bound to be infectious, and however naughty Dickens might be suspected of being with the young actress there was so much gossip about, his lively humours could not fail to compel liking and affection. However dark the shadows may have been, they should always be seen behind these brilliant lights. There is all the difference in the world between the wickedness—so-called—that is the overflow of high spirits and vital forces, and that which is like the leakage of dregs from a weak, half-filled vessel in which the life has gone bad.

Another point to remember is that this setting up of

himself as a country squire did not alienate Dickens from the poor. Each summer he allowed a working-men's club to hold cricket matches in his meadow, and each Christmas organized foot races and local sports. And so well did the people behave themselves, that he got the landlord of the Falstaff to set up a drinking-booth on the field. 'Not to seem to dictate or distrust,' he says, 'I gave all the prizes (about ten pounds in the aggregate) in money. The great mass of the crowd were labouring men of all kinds, soldiers, sailors, and navvies. They did not, between half-past ten, when we began, and sunset, displace a rope or a stake; and they left every barrier and flag as neat as they found it. There was not a dispute, and there was no drunkenness whatever.' At the end of the day's jollification Dickens made a speech from the lawn, 'saying that please God we would do it again next year. They cheered most lustily and dispersed. The road between this and Chatham was like a Fair all day; and surely it is a fine thing to get such perfect behaviour out of a reckless seaport town.'

This restless energy may itself have been symptomatic of his malady. That is for the heart-specialist to say. But anyone could see that for all his energy and bravado he was going to pieces from 1866 onwards. There was trouble with his foot during the winter of 1865-6, followed in the spring of 1866 with admitted heart trouble. His old friend and doctor, Frank Beard, advised a specialist. 'There seems,' wrote Dickens to his sister-in-law, who was now in charge of his family and household, 'to be degeneration of some functions of the heart. It does not contract as it should . . . I have noticed for some time a decided change in my buoyancy and hopefulness—in other words, in my usual "tone".' Part of the defect was due to the strain of his readings and excessive work generally which themselves were due to his loss of domestic happiness.

He was now rich, and getting tremendous fun out of clothes, affecting pea-green jackets and Count D'Orsay cloaks, which gratified the dandy in him but hardly matched his face, which was bronzed and weather-beaten like a

sailor's. The effect of this contrast was to give him the swashbuckling air of a stage pirate, while in his eyes, as someone said, 'lurked the iron will of a demon and the tender pity of an angel'. No wonder he has been such a puzzle to his biographers!

In those last years he seems to have been consistently generating more power than he could control. It was as though the titanic being that was Charles Dickens could no longer be contained in a feeble house of flesh. He might fool away the time at parties, and be capable of performing his old high jinks for an hour or two on the lawn; but his friends could see that he was no longer the Charles Dickens they had known ten years earlier. Yet the one thing he would not do was rest. The demon that had carried him to the heights refused to release him from its bondage. So although Dickens knew that his public readings were killing him, and that he no longer needed the money they raised, he concluded a final contract with Chappells to give forty-two readings for the sum of two thousand, five hundred pounds. The tragedy is that there was no one at hand with enough sense or strength of character to save him from himself before it was too late. But perhaps no one could have done so, however strong-willed. The eagle can never be made to behave like a barnyard cock. It must accept the conditions of its power. Dickens knew what these were for himself. 'I hold my inventive capacity,' he wrote, 'on the stern condition that it must master my whole life, have complete possession of me, make its own demands upon me, and sometimes for months together put everything from me. If I had not known long ago that my place could never be held unless I were at any moment ready to devote myself to it entirely, I should have dropped out very soon.'

Although he was now separated from his wife and keeping Ellen Ternan in an establishment at Peckham, where he was known as Mr. Tringham, guests continued to be entertained at Gad's Hill with Mamie Dickens or Miss Hogarth as hostess. Longfellow and his daughters came, Charles Eliot Norton, Mr. and Mrs. Fields, and other American friends, as well as

his London cronies. And what might be thought curious if all that his detractors have said against him were true is that his neighbours at Higham and Rochester continued to respect him. On his return from America in 1868 a public 'Welcome Home' was organized, at which all the farmers in the parish turned out in their market gigs, and every cottage along the route from Gravesend to Gad's Hill Place was dressed with flags. As for Gad's Hill Place itself, it was so completely covered with flags and foliage that not a brick remained visible. And still his neighbours were not satisfied. On the following Sunday morning there was a special peal of welcome on the bells of the village church, which gave particular pleasure to the villagers because there had been a conspiracy among them to meet him at their own station on arrival, and there take the horse out of his private trap and drag him home themselves. Mamie and Miss Hogarth had got news of this, and, thinking he might be tired after his journey, had warned him to arrive at Gravesend instead. So, having been cheated out of their plan to drag him home, his neighbours got all the more pleasure out of being able to ring him home.

When the American publisher, Fields, and his wife, stayed at Gad's Hill, Dickens was planning *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, and one night took them under police protection to see the sinister Ratcliffe Highway along the Thames Embankment east of London Bridge, where Lascars and Chinese frequented rows of disreputable lodging-houses. Here he showed them the opium den in which the hideous old woman who appeared in the novel as Princess Puffer held court. They were also shown the ancient buildings of Rochester, and under the stimulus of this showmanship Dickens was soon launched on his new and last novel, with these as its setting. An agreement was drawn up with Frederick Chapman which provided that Dickens should receive £7,500 from the first 25,000 copies sold, and that the profits from all further copies should be shared equally between author and publisher. In October of that year he read to Fields the opening chapters of the book, and Fields

was enthralled to hear about Jasper awakening from opium visions in the Ratcliffe Highway they had visited together, and the description of his gatehouse in the ancient city they had explored so recently.

Did Fields, we wonder, realize that this was Dickens's swan song? He cannot have failed to see the contrast between the Rochester into which Mr. Pickwick's coach had rattled in maytime, the time when he himself had been shown Kent, and the mouldering, autumnal Cloisterham of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. He would recognize also a mastery in the descriptive passages that Dickens had never surpassed. The demon will was again in control of the ageing masters' pen. Chesterton, with his unrivalled insight into the workings of Dickens's mind, described it as the final and splendid staggering appearance before mankind of the dying magician. The plot is puzzling enough, but there are more significant features than story-telling to be descried in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. In the character of John Jasper, Dickens was searching his own heart. He who was so dependent on love and understanding, and who was now at the height of his fame, knew that in reality he was an outcast. The applause of his great audiences had become a mockery to him. The money was still pouring in, but it would buy none of the things he wanted most—not even a hearth to sit by. In the madness of his passion he had fouled his own nest.

The Mystery of Edwin Drood is a most revealing document. To be sure it is a mystery still, notwithstanding the fact that numerous books have been written to expound it, and at least thirteen attempts have been made to complete it. *Edwin Drood* is quite different from the rest of Dickens. All his exuberance has gone. It is tight, strung-up, and morbid. He never relaxes for a moment—never, as it were, puts on his slippers or takes the dogs for a run—while writing. We know that he had been influenced by the publication of his friend Wilkie Collins's novel, *The Moonstone*, and that he was trying his hand at such a book himself; but that does not explain the extreme tension of the book. The only valid explanation of this is to be found in the utter decay

of the family life that had once meant so much to him, because whether Dickens was a good or a bad parent, nothing could be plainer than that he desired with all his heart to be a good one, and was pathetically dependent on the affection of his women-folk. The truth is that the forces he had dreaded all his life now had him gripped by the throat. He had fought the demons of doubt and passion all his life, and until these last few years had kept them under control. Now he was weak in body and tired in mind, and they had gained the mastery. All this is to be read in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. In the murder of Edwin by John Jasper, Dickens was making his own confession. He also feared that he had murdered the thing he loved. If we read the fragment in this light we may well feel that not only did he fear that he had done this, but that he was struggling to find a way of escape from the consequences and failing. That is why not one solution to the many problems raised in the fragment is suggested in the text. Dickens himself, we may think, was as confused as his readers have been. Even the murder itself is not proved. After all, he had written twenty-three chapters of *Edwin Drood* when he died. Something ought to have become plain by that time. As it was the only thing that now seems plain is that Dickens had poured into John Jasper something of his own wretchedness during those last months of his life. He had pursued Ellen Ternan 'to the death', just as John Jasper pursued Rosa Bud, and in his portrayal of this choir-master, lay precentor, and opium addict, he was exposing the Jekyll-Hyde complex that was torturing his soul.

For the setting of this grim story—a story in which no one, and least of all the author, can be regarded as sane, Dickens chose Rochester, which he haunted during those last months. Jasper, we learn, lived at 'an old stone gatehouse crossing the close, with an arched thoroughfare passing beneath it', and so closely is the city now identified with *Edwin Drood* that College, or Chertsey's, Gatehouse is always referred to as Jasper's, although, in common with his usual practice, Dickens incorporated features suggested by the

Prior's and the Deanery gatehouses. Most of the other places in the story can be identified as easily. Minor Canon Row, 'a quiet place in the shadow of the Cathedral', where the Reverend Septimus Crisparkle lived with his mother, the 'divine shepherdess', is quickly reached after passing Jasper's Gateway and the west door of the cathedral. The clerical character of the houses is suggested by Dickens in his graphic way by mentioning that they 'had odd little porches over the doors, like sounding boards over old pulpits'. The cathedral close had a strange fascination for him during these last weeks. The enclosed strip of ground in front of St. Nicholas's church, between Jasper's gatehouse and the cathedral, is part of the old churchyard, and it was here that an unhappy sheep was grazing.

'Among these secluded nooks,' he says, 'there is little stir or movement after dark. There is little enough in the high tide of the day, but there is next to none at night. Besides that, the cheerfully frequented High Street lies nearly parallel to the spot (the old Cathedral rising between the two) and is the natural channel in which the Cloisterham traffic flows, a certain awful hush pervades the ancient pile, the cloisters, and the churchyard after dark, which not many people care to encounter. . . . One might fancy that the tide of life was stemmed by Mr. Jasper's own Gatehouse. The murmur of the tide is heard beyond; but no wave passes the archway, over which his lamp burns red behind the curtain, as if the building were a Lighthouse. . . .

'The red light burns steadily all the evening in the Lighthouse on the margin of the tide of busy life. Softened sounds and hum of traffic pass it, and flow on irregularly into the lonely precincts; but very little else goes by save violent rushes of wind. It comes on to blow a boisterous gale . . . John Jasper's lamp is kindled, and his Lighthouse is shining, when Mr. Datchery returns alone towards it. As mariners on a dangerous voyage, approaching an iron-bound coast, may look along the beams of the warning light to the haven lying beyond it that may never be reached, so

Mr. Datchery's wistful gaze is directed to this beacon and beyond. . . ."

On the esplanade, between the castle and the river, Edwin and Rosa met for the last time and agreed to part. Near Boley Hill was 'the paved Quaker settlement', with its twelve sedate houses 'up in a shady corner'. The 'Travellers' Twopenny' was a common lodging-house at the junction of Frog Alley and Crow Lane, originally called The Duck. But apart from the cathedral close, and in sharp contrast to it, the principal setting is the High Street. Indeed, 'The streets of Cloisterham city,' says Dickens, 'are little more than one narrow street by which you get into it and get out of it: the rest being mostly disappointing yards, with pumps in them and no thoroughfare.' Here was the Crozier as the Mitre had become, 'the orthodox hotel' at Cloisterham, a place which Dickens had known from boyhood, and which he described in another place as having 'a bar that seemed to be the next best thing to a bishopric, it was so snug'. Here also was the 'Nuns' House', of which we are told that, 'The house-front is so old and worn, and the brass plate is so shining and staring, that the general result has reminded imaginative strangers of a battered old beau with a large modern eye-glass stuck in his blind eye.' This, of course, was Miss Twinkleton's seminary for young ladies, where Rosa Bud was a boarder, and it was by the sundial in the garden that the interview with Jasper took place. This fine Elizabethan mansion is now the city museum and houses an imposing collection of his books and manuscripts.

Across the way from the Nun's house, or Eastgate House, to give it its proper name, is the gabled building where Mr. Sapsea conducted his business, although the carved figure of the auctioneer in the rostrum was introduced by Dickens from another auctioneer's premises at St. Margaret's Banks. The same building had already done service in Dickens as Mr. Pumblechook's corn and seedsman's premises in *Great Expectations*, and at the time the earlier book was written it was in fact occupied by a corn

and seedsman, named William Fairbairn, who actually had the little rows of seed drawers described in the book.

Dickens came down into Rochester for the last time on 6 June, 1870, when he walked into town with his dogs and was seen in the cathedral close, gazing towards the Vines, opposite Restoration House, which was the Satis House of *Great Expectations*. The result of the visit was that when he returned to his desk he led Dachery and Princess Puffer to this same place for their final interview. He was never again to see Rochester, and his last description of it was a singularly appropriate farewell: 'A brilliant morning shines in the old city,' he wrote. 'Its antiquities and ruins are surpassingly beautiful with a lusty ivy gleaming in the sun and the rich trees waving in the balmy air. Changes of glorious light from moving boughs, songs of birds, scents from gardens, woods, and fields . . . penetrate into the Cathedral, subdue its earthy odour, and preach the Resurrection and the Life.'

On the 7th he drove into Cobham Wood with Miss Hogarth. The Park looked so beautiful that he dismissed the carriage and walked home. All that evening he sat quietly in the dining-room, speaking of his love for Gad's Hill and his desire to be for ever associated with the district. When he died, he said, he wished to be buried in the cathedral graveyard, at the foot of the castle wall. The next day was his last—or the last in which he was conscious. He worked all morning in the chalet, and, contrary to his usual practice, returned to it after lunch.

His last days were much like others at this time of his life, and bathed in the sunshine of the warm June days. Sometimes, it is true, his foot was too painful to allow him to walk in the woods or down the hill to Rochester. It had to be poulticed. The readings had gone on almost to the end, although it had become noticeable that he had difficulty in articulating properly when he was tired. Pickwick would become 'Pickswick', or 'Picnic', or 'Peckwicks'. He was getting rather too fond of money, and could not forget that these readings brought him in an average of a hundred

pounds a night. In all, he had made forty-five thousand pounds out of them, which accounted for nearly half the ninety-three thousand pounds he left when he died. New triumphs were coming to him right to the end. The Queen sent for him to Buckingham Palace, and said how much she regretted never having heard him read from his works. But it was too late. He could not then face the strain of reading to her even privately, so he sent her a set of his works bound in red morocco and gold, and in return received a copy of her *Journal of Our Life in the Highlands*. There was talk of an honour being bestowed on him; but he knew it was too late for that.

At the close of this last day of life he wrote a few letters after returning to the house. At dinner Miss Hogarth noticed lines of pain in his face. 'For an hour', he told her, 'he had been very ill.' He ordered dinner to go on as usual, then suddenly staggered to his feet and muttered that he must go to London at once. His mind was obviously wandering. If Miss Hogarth had not rushed to his aid he would have fallen. She tried to get him to the sofa, but failed. He slumped to the ground, and had to be lifted on to the sofa by servants. There he remained unconscious all night and most of the following day, while his family and the faithful Miss Hogarth kept watch. There was no return to consciousness. Just before six o'clock his breathing grew fainter, and at ten minutes past six the soul left him.

CHAPTER XIV

THE UNTARNISHED MIRROR

THOSE who are disturbed by what has been written about Dickens since his death may take heart from the knowledge that the truth about him, as about every great writer, is to be found in his works, and those are secure enough. Although hardly a year goes by without someone writing an article with such a title as 'A Dickens Revival', any bookseller will confirm that Dickens is the one novelist who never goes out of favour. He escaped even the usual recession that follows death. According to statements made by Messrs. Chapman and Hall¹ in 1892, the sale of his novels during the previous year was four times greater than it had been in 1869, when he was still alive. They stated that between 1869 and 1891 more than half a million copies of *Pickwick Papers* alone were sold—a most impressive figure when we remember how small the reading public of those days was. This universal popularity continued to grow until everyone marvelled at it. 'One stands appalled at the majesty of such an achievement,' wrote Stephen Leacock. 'In the sheer comprehensiveness of it, no writer in all the world has ever equalled or approached it. None ever will. The time is past.' And the tide continues to flow, each generation finding its own reflection in the expanding waters of his fame. Here is genius that challenges comparison with Dostoevsky's in its depth, and with Balzac's in the sweep of its passion, as well as a gift for social comedy and burlesque that is unique in kind as well as degree.

If, however, we stand aside from the work, and consider the creator apart from the creations—not, incidentally, a particularly sensible thing to do—we do find a different picture, or rather series of pictures. The man who at one

¹ *English Illustrated Magazine*, December 1892.

time seems confident and successful, at others assumes the guise of a frightened child, a tormented lover, or a conscience-stricken egotist. The lack of assurance is bewildering. We may try to account for it by saying that here we have genius so spendthrift of its riches that it was continually exhausting itself. Like those of the river he knew so well, it was as though the waters of his genius rose and fell daily. He was like a miller who did not dam his stream. The renewal of strength, as we all learn sooner or later, comes more slowly as we grow older, and we have to conserve it accordingly. It was a lesson that Dickens learnt only when it was too late to save himself from the consequences of his imprudence, and this explains part, at least, of the frenzy of his last years. It explains why, when there ought to have been the quiet strength of the master, there was instead the defensive madness that some have called megalomania. But however loyal we may be we must all doubt at times whether this explains all the weaknesses, or alleged weaknesses, in his character, some of which—not all—are clearly evident in the works themselves; because while the truth about Dickens is to be found in his novels, it is not always the whole truth that we find there. The artist, by his very nature, is selective. His mind is a sieve. The greater part of whatever runs through it is lost, which is particularly tantalizing to the biographer, whose business it is to increase our knowledge of his subject by supplementing the known with the unknown. In doing this he is often tempted to listen to what is not strictly evidence. This is especially so with Dickens, with whom such gaps in knowledge are now alleged to be wilful suppressions, designed to deceive.

In recent years, as we have seen, the professional gap-stoppers have surpassed themselves in devising theories and fantasies to account for the tragic collapse of Dickens's home life. Frankly, although I am ready enough to admit that my opinion is not of much value, I have never been very impressed by this psychiatric gap-stopping. It rarely seems to amount to anything more than mud-slinging, however polished the instrument with which the mud is slung

may be. For this reason I was delighted when the late Desmond McCarthy, whose opinion was worth something, in reviewing Jack Lindsay's biography of Dickens for the *Sunday Times* of 26 February, 1950, wrote:

'Of course, he was often inconsiderate, harshly impatient—often behaved like a man hallucinated . . . "the restlessness," he wrote to his old love, Maria Winter, after meeting her again—"the restlessness or waywardness of an author's mind. You have never seen it before you, or lived with it or had occasion to think or care about it, and you cannot have the necessary consideration for it." (Nor have most of his later biographers.) "The mere consciousness of an engagement will sometimes worry a whole day. There are penalties paid for writing books. Whoever is devoted to an Art must be content to deliver himself wholly up to it, and find his recompense in it. I am grieved you suspect me of not wanting to see you, but I can't help it; I must go my way." And, of course, here also lies the explanation of his relations with his wife and children.'

The same point has been put in various ways, no doubt, with reference to every great writer. I once heard Dorothy Sayers argue that all worth-while writers put the best that is in them into their books and that in consequence the rest of their lives is only the leavings. As to the misdeeds, someone said that great men commonly have larger faults than small men can find room for. At any level of life the virtues have to be weighed against the vices. How many biographers are there who are capable of weighing the merits against the demerits of Charles Dickens? Not many, yet any flea can bite.

But what is so disconcerting about Dickens is that he seems to give the lie to this special plea in defence of the artist by living a full life outside his work. If we had only the vision of him tearing himself to pieces to write books, and suffering the consequences of working at such pressure by going down to an early grave, the most antagonistic might have some sympathy; but the truth is that he was not the fish out of water that most authors are when dragged

out of their intellectual cubby-holes. He was a genial, practical man, a good mixer, and a prosperous man of affairs. This, in fact, is one of the complaints against him, because the one thing that no intellectual snob can endure is a prosperous writer, and Dickens always was prosperous—largely because he was so efficient and business-like in his dealings with both editors and publishers. Right at the beginning of his career it was because his clients discovered how quick and reliable he was as a reporter that commissions poured in and sent him racing all over the country, with such delectable results for his readers. In later life he was inclined to think the two years spent in Doctors' Commons the most useful of his entire career. Dickens had none of the temperamental vagaries popularly—though often erroneously—associated with genius. And as for his social normality we have Thomas Trollope's statement that, 'He warmed the social atmosphere wherever he appeared with that summer glow which seemed to attend him. . . . He was perhaps the largest-hearted man I ever knew. He hated a mean action or a mean sentiment.' The difference in him seems to have been in degree rather than in kind. Leigh Hunt says that his face had in it 'the life and soul of fifty human beings'. And Gladys Storey, in *Dickens and Daughter*, says: 'Those who have studied the character of Charles Dickens in all its varying phases and moods, where strength, weakness, tenderness, severity, generosity and carefulness are revealed, and take their places beside other traits of character in this so extraordinary and wonderful a man, will recognise that the dominant characteristic lying behind every trait which, with hurricane force, swept through his entire mental and physical being, was his amazing energy, at times demoniacal in its fierceness.'

The best evidence for judging Dickens as a man of action is to be found in his letters to the Baroness Burdett-Coutts, of which five hundred are still extant. Dickens and Angela Burdett-Coutts met in 1835 and remained close friends until his death in 1870. During those thirty-five years they worked together to improve the lot of the poor,

fighting the pundits day by day and week by week with integrity and unselfish zeal that alone should be enough to confound those who accuse him of megalomania. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his statement: 'I have nothing to gain—everything to lose (for public quiet is my bread)—but I am in desperate earnest, because I know it is a desperate case.' What glory could there be in checking accounts, interviewing staff, and generally directing the affairs of Urania Cottage, the home for prostitutes and unmarried mothers which he and the baroness founded at Shepherd's Bush? 'I have laid in all the dresses and linen of every sort for the whole house,' he wrote to her in a letter of 1847, 'purchasing the materials at the wholesale prices. I made them as cheerful in appearance as they reasonably could be—at the same time very neat and modest.' So many of the reforms he worked for are now taken for granted that we tend to lose sight of the struggle there was to win them. The searching power of Dickens's social insight is something to marvel at, and it was while he was in full spate as a novelist that all this other work—rescuing foundlings and every kind of social outcast, devising after-care for those who came out of prison, appealing for slum-clearance and town-planning—was going on.

Here, in one of the letters, is a description of a squalid scene in dockland:

'In one corner is a spot called Hickman's Folly . . . which looks like the last hopeless climax of everything poor and filthy. There is a public-house in it, with the odd sign of the Ship Aground, but it is wonderfully appropriate, for everything seems to have got aground there—never to be got off any more until the whole globe is stopped in its rolling and shivered. No more road than in an American swamp—odious shed for horses, and donkeys, and vagrants, and rubbish, in front of the parlour windows—wooden houses like horrible old packing-cases full of fever for a countless number of years.

'In a broken down gallery at the back of a row of these, there was a wan child looking over at a starved old white

horse who was making a meal of oyster shells. The sun was going down and flaring out like an angry fire at the child—and the child, and I, and the pale horse, stared at one another in silence for some minutes as if we were so many figures in a dismal allegory. I went round to look at the front of the house, but the windows were all broken and the door was shut up as tight as anything so dismantled could be. Lord knows when anybody will go in to the child, but I suppose it's looking over still—with a little wiry head of hair, as pale as the horse, all sticking up on its head—and an old weazen face—and two bony hands holding on to the rail of the gallery, with little fingers like convulsed skewers.'

All his life Dickens continued to identify himself with those who were on the losing side in life. Rich as he became, he was never a social climber. Perhaps he saw too clearly that nothing could save the ruling class of his day when the rot of poverty, disease, and vice, that had been creeping through the foundations since the Industrial Revolution came in to turn quiet old market towns into soul-destroying conglomerations of ignorant half-starved factory-hands, had eaten through the last remaining timbers. He knew that he was separated by the barrier of birth, now being fortified against upstarts, from the society of the landed gentry; the new employer class he despised. 'The people,' he told the baroness, 'will not bear for any length of time what they bear now. I see it written in every truthful indication that I am capable of discovering anywhere. And I want to interpose something between them and their wrath. For this reason solely, I am a Reformer heart and soul.'

This, it will be remembered, was the time when every evil in life was blasphemously ascribed to the will of God or the wickedness of His fallen creatures. Dickens believed that whatever the root cause of human misery might be, and he did not set himself up as a theologian, a great deal could be done to improve matters by giving the people a better environment, and an easier, healthier, happier life. With all his heart and soul he believed in the upsurging

power of the human heart, and in the desire of every normal healthy person to better himself and his fellows mentally, morally and spiritually if only he got a chance to show what was in him. 'My faith in the people governing,' he said in 1869, 'is, on the whole, infinitesimal; my faith in the People governed is, on the whole, illimitable.' In other words, he was prepared to stake all on humanity. The governing class, whatever its colour, he distrusted, because he knew how easily power corrupts; but if the governors could be kept in touch with the people, and made answerable to them in more than a nominal sense, then, he believed, society would move forward to freedom and justice.

There are times when Dickens might be thought a red-hot revolutionary. But the dangerous revolutionaries, surely, are the intellectuals, not those who try to put their ideas into practice as Dickens did, with the baroness's help. It is doubtful whether, even now, we fully appreciate the importance of this side of his life's work. Bernard Shaw, who learnt so much of his technique from Dickens, went so far as to say: 'If Dickens's day as a sentimental romancer is over, his day as a social prophet and social critic is only dawning.' Whether it is right to describe one who was never a reasoner as a social critic may be questioned, but his insight and intuition were uncanny. They had, in fact, the feminine quality which is seen in so many aspects of his character—his love of dressing up, for example, his desire to be loved, his volatility, his warm, impulsive giving of himself.

And so we might go on discussing him for ever. So complex was the nature of this extraordinary man that we shall never get him finally pinned down, which is a good thing, because we should lose interest in him if we did. The most important biography since Forster's, that of Professor Edgar Johnson, has been published since this book was started. Its full title is *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*. The extension is significant. There were no bees in Edgar Johnson's bonnet when he set himself to summarize the mass of Dickensian lore that had accumulated

since 1870. He took up the work with the trained mind of the scholar and with a craftsman's passion for detail. He sustained it at a level that only those who have followed up a few of his sources can fully appreciate. And when the book was written the two words that emerged as signifying what was dominant in the life of Charles Dickens were Tragedy and Triumph. Conflicting as they are, we must take them together—a man of the heights, and at the same time a man of the depths.

If we are satisfied that Edgar Johnson's is—as far as is humanly possible—a true statement of the man's life, the question at issue is whether the cause of the tragedy was honourable or dishonourable. Here we never can come to terms, simply because, as Mrs. Gamp put it, 'Them which is of other natures thinks different.' To Carlyle he was 'the noble Dickens, every inch of him an honest man', to others a hypocrite and a man so obsessed by his own ego that he was prepared to sacrifice even his offspring on the altar of his own pride—surely a harsh judgment to pass on one to whom compassion was, perhaps, the highest of all the virtues, and a judgment which some of us would say is based on false evidence. I am not going to set myself up as counsel for the defence; but it is, I submit, worth bearing in mind that the most obvious way of testing a man's sincerity in his championing of the oppressed is to note how he conducts himself towards those in his own power. It is often said that no man is a hero to his valet. Few are. But Dickens, we know, was respected and even loved by all who worked for him.

But let us leave these disputed questions about his life and conclude with a final glance at the works—the mirror that is still untarnished. Whatever his own conduct was, in these cruelty, selfishness, duplicity, and self-righteousness are hated and attacked with every weapon of caricature and ridicule, and their opposites exalted. Dickens assumed the role of the strong champion fighting terrible shadows, in himself and in society, with a gleaming sword of light. It was the sort of fairy-tale role that appealed to the eternal

child in him. And it may well be that this child in Dickens is at least half the secret of his attraction. It is the clue to that wide-eyed wonder and eagerness of spirit that gives *Pickwick*, *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *Great Expectations*, and the rest of them their unfailing freshness. All his life he saw everything with either the delighted or the frightened eyes of a child. 'He was fascinated,' says Edgar Johnson, 'by the decaying cabbage-stalks of Covent Garden, or by the fishy smell of Mr. Peggotty's outhouse where crabs and lobsters never left off pinching one another, as he was by the Cratchits' goose in its hissing hot gravy. The grime and foul gutters of Saffron Hill interested him as much as the clowns and spangle-skirted bareback riders of Astley's Circus, the hemp and tangled masts of Limehouse Hole, the shadowy rafters of Westminster Hall, the salt reaches of Cooling Marsh, the dripping urns of Chesney Wold, Boffin's dust-heaps, and the polluted air of the Old Bailey. He was not repelled by a lively scoundrel like Mr. Jingle or revolted by Jo's malodorous body and verminous rags; he felt no scorn for chuckleheaded Mr. Toots or the shabby and nebulous Newman Noggs; even for the merry and black-hearted Fagin in the greasy thieves' kitchen Dickens had a gleam of sympathy.'

For most of his readers it is as a creator of characters and deviser of comic situations that Dickens is supreme. He had the luck to live and work at the time when personal idiosyncracies were at their most riotous. Universal education and easy transport had not yet rubbed the corners off people. So he was able to create a world more diverting and exuberant than that of any other English novelist. Tragedy and farce, sentiment and wit, succeed each other through these medleys of human relationships and odd situations that he called novels. Never was there a man with such an appetite for life, or who flew to his pen with such gusto. There are all manner of faults to be found with his writings, yet the characters of Dickens, and the England of Dickens, are still as real to his readers as they were when the curtains were drawn at Gad's Hill Place, the house he

had loved since boyhood, with the sun still shining on Cobham Woods behind, the distant Thames in front, and the Rochester of so many of his novels at the foot of the hill. These were the places nearest his heart, and they will be linked with his name to the end. It meant little to Dickens that Rochester had been a walled city in A.D. 600, that it had been sacked by the Danes and honoured by visits from a long succession of royal pilgrims. He did better than rifle the treasure house of its history, he added to it, so that Rochester is now pre-eminently the city of Charles Dickens. There are other castles, other cathedrals, and other mediaeval high streets. There is only one Charles Dickens. We forget where kings and queens halted in their progresses; we do not forget that it was at the Bull Inn, Rochester, that Pickwick, Tupman, Snodgrass, and Winkle, dismounted on the recommendation of a ridiculous mountebank named Jingle on 13 May, 1827, which thus became the most memorable date in the whole chronicle of Rochester's history. And although no other part of the country mattered to him quite so much as that, there is not an inn or village at which he or his characters alighted, if only for a meal, where he is not still a living presence.

S. N. Missi
5.6.57

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